

Midweek Lent #3
(03/08/23)

Text – John 15:1-17

Theme – “The Vine”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you know what struck me as I did my preparation for the last couple of sermons? It’s this: that we are with Jesus on His last night with the apostles — less than 24 hours away from His death on the cross – and He is talking an awful lot, not about the Second Article of the Creed (Justification) but rather the Third (Sanctification)! Last Sunday we heard Jesus promise to send the Holy Spirit; today Jesus talks about the fruit of our faith, our good works which show forth His love.

That kind of shocked me a bit. I expected to hear Jesus go on at length about what was soon to happen: His betrayal and arrest, the trials and sentence of death, the cross and the hell He endured there for our sins. And yet, here we have Jesus explaining how Christians will produce fruit! How we will lead lives of love and service. How we will glorify God by our works. Very interesting. But, of course, there can only be such sanctification AFTER there is justification. Or, to put it in the terms Jesus uses in our text, the branches can only bear fruit if/when they are joined to the Vine. (pause)

That is where Jesus starts: with describing Himself as the “*true Vine*”. Planted by His Father. Of course, that brings us back to Christ’s incarnation, to the Father sending the Son to be our Savior. To the Son taking on flesh and blood in the womb of the virgin Mary. The Savior comes, then, because the Father sends Him – He plants Him in our world. A world fallen and

torn by our sin. A world devoid of good fruit, but full only of our wickedness and evil. But the Father takes one little living sprig – pure and good – and He plants it. To make the whole world – a ruined and dead vineyard, indeed, after Adam’s sin – to make it GOOD again.

The purpose of the grape vine is to produce grapes – that is obvious. But the grapes are plucked and harvested, they are crushed and killed, they bleed to make wine. So it is also with this true Vine. He is conceived, He is born, He grows and lives only to die. To be crushed and killed, to bleed and die to give us life. Like wine, His blood is shed for us – that’s the whole purpose of this Vine’s planting. But it is in that dying that the Vine gives life to its branches, to you and me.

And that IS what we are, isn’t it? Branches of the Vine. Joined to Him at baptism, fed and sustained by Him in Word and Sacraments, as we grow; drawing our very life from Him just as branches live only in the vine. And it is because we are His members, drawing our life from Him, that we are now able to produce those fruits of which Jesus speaks in our lesson.

So, what exactly ARE those fruits? Well, Jesus summarizes them all under the commandment of love. We are to love, as we have been loved. God has made us, He has given us all that we have, He has sacrificed Himself for us. And THAT is how we are to be fruitful: by loving, giving, sacrificing for our neighbor. How does Jesus say that we will show ourselves to be His own? By showing His love in our lives. By speaking as He speaks. By doing as He has done. By giving and forgiving as He has given and forgiven us.

So, the obvious question is: Do we show such fruit in our lives? Our first inclination, I am sure, is to confess that we fall far short. We do not love God and man perfectly. We are selfish and self-centered. Quick to anger and slow to forgive. Greedy and grasping, rather than

giving and sacrificing. We are sinners. Imperfect and faulty images of our Father. We fail to produce the fruit as we ought.

And that answer is true. We ARE sinners. But we also need to remember that we have been forgiven all our sin. As Jesus said in our lesson, we have been made clean. Not clean by our own efforts, but MADE clean by Him. Washed in His blood and cleansed. Never forget that. Yes, you and I sin every day. But every day we are also forgiven. All our sin has been heaped up onto Jesus' back and carried to the cross. All sin has been paid for, and our debt forever satisfied. When God sees us, He sees NO sin because it has already been punished at Calvary. And it is that forgiveness which gives us the ability – the “juice” – to produce good fruit.

And you do! All Christians do. We can't help it, for that is our nature as branches of the Vine. Even if we don't always see it, or even when those fruits may seem to be rather skimpy. Think about it. Jesus says that on the Last Day He will separate the sheep from the goats, the believers from the unbelievers. And the sheep, He says, will be rewarded for their good works. But the sheep, we are told, ask WHEN did we do those things? You see, Christians do not keep track of such things (and if we do, then our motivation is all wrong). No, Christians just DO them, without even being aware of it.

And we do them where God has planted us. That is, we live our faith right here, among our family and community. As parents and children, as friends and neighbors, as employers and employees, as citizens. In all your relationships you are called to show forth God's love. To be your Father's hands and mouth. To be His agent and instrument. To feed and clothe, to heal and protect, to show compassion and care, to forgive and restore. Every word from your mouth, then, is to be His. Every action, every thought, every desire is to bring His love to others.

So then, you go to work -- not to earn money to buy yourself nice things -- but rather to be a productive member of the community. To raise the crops that feed the world. To sell the goods that clothe people and sustain their lives. To build houses to give someone a home. To provide services that make life better for others.

You go to school to learn – not just for the sake of acquiring knowledge for yourself – but so that you can use that knowledge to help others. You hang out with your friends, not for what they can do for you, but rather for what you can do for them. You vote, not for those candidates or programs that will enrich your life, but for those that will better the community. And so on.

And you DO those things. Again, not perfectly. But you do them. You have to, because you are joined to the true Vine, to Christ Himself, and so you WILL show His love. Now, can we do better? Of course. Will we do better? Yes, as long as we remain branches connected to the Vine. (pause)

Such lives of love and service truly glorify God. They glorify Him because they show Him to be good. To be the One who gives all good things. The One who does everything for us. Our good works, then, are NOT to make us look good. Not to cause others to praise and thank us. Indeed, if in this life we are never recognized for them, it matters not. Because it is not about us. It is about God. The One who loves so much that He feeds and clothes even the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. The One who forgives even those who reject and scorn Him. The One who only gives and never demands back.

When we quietly, unselfishly, even anonymously do those works He has given us to do, then we are happy and content. For then we are directing all glory to Him. A Christian parent shows the Father's love. A Christian neighbor shows the compassion of Christ, the real Good Samaritan. A Christian friend reveals "*What a Friend we have in Jesus*". A Christian ruler

reflects the King of Kings. A Christian doctor or nurse points to the Great Physician. Christian farmers and storekeepers serve merely as agents of the Lord of the Harvest. Christian soldiers and police and emergency workers answer to the Lord of the heavenly Host. Just as the Son reveals and glorifies the Father, so Christian branches reveal and glorify the Vine – the true source of all goodness and love. (pause)

And to help us stay productive branches, Jesus says the Father will “prune” us from time. You know what that means – we prune back the roses to get more flowers, or the shrubbery to make it more full/lush/beautiful. In the same way, God – the Gardener – has to prune us back at times. But that hurts! We don’t like it. And we usually don’t understand the reason for it, at the time. But we don’t have to understand – God knows. And His pruning always produces greater and sweeter fruit.

Those of us who are older probably understand this a bit better – we can look back at those rough patches in our lives, when God was “cutting us back” a bit, and now we can see the results. How we have grown through trials. How He has joined us tighter and stronger to our Savior when those “other things” get taken away. How our suffering leads to good, for ourselves or for others. But that doesn’t make it any easier at the time when we are going through it, does it? No, the natural inclination is to wonder WHY God is doing this to us. Why He is letting us down. Why we must suffer. So, it is helpful for us to keep these words of our Lord in mind when Satan comes, trying to get us to doubt or give up. God knows exactly what He is doing. And it is always – always! – good. (pause)

But it all starts with the Vine. That is the source, the foundation, the cause of fruitful branches. And so it is with sanctification and justification: first comes Christ’s work for us, and only then comes our response. First is Jesus living for us, to obey the Law; dying for us, to pay

for our sin; rising for us, to open heaven. Then comes our faith, which grafts us into our Lord, the true Vine (and even THAT comes from Him, not us!). And our lives of love and service flow from that connection, that union with our Savior. Because He loves us, we now love Him and our fellow-man. Because He lives in us, we DO become fruitful. Truly, it all goes back to Him.

And so, the branches never presume any credit for their fruit. In fact, they cannot even begin to imagine such a thing. No, all they have and do is rooted and grounded in Him. All they want to do is to be channels of His life-giving love. Thus it is that the greatest fruit of our faith is to point to Him. To speak the Gospel. To teach our children. To sing His praises. To witness and invite and evangelize. To gladly offer our time, our wealth, our abilities in service of His Church. To be diligent in our prayers. To come here to worship our Lord – to be filled with His grace so that we may go out into the world as His servants. (pause)

Fruitful branches. So you are. Not because you have chosen Christ, but rather that He has chosen you. Not because you are such great and wonderful people. Not because you have so much of your own to offer and give. Not because of anything of your own. But always and only because you are one with the Vine. And He works in/through you. In you, the world sees and knows Christ. In your words and deeds. In your sharing the Gospel. And *that* glorifies the Father. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Hymn – “*Chief of Sinners Though I Be*” (LSB #611)