

Sermon for the 5th Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2009
John 15:1-8

During these Sundays of Easter we have been hearing Jesus talk about who He is and what that means for our lives. Last Sunday we heard Jesus refer to Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. We are the sheep who would die without the tender care of our loving Shepherd. This image speaks of complete reliance on Jesus for survival. Today, Jesus gives us another agricultural picture to demonstrate His relationship with us. He declares, "I am the vine, you are the branches." We certainly know how important it is for the branch to stay connected to the vine. When it comes time for the harvest, you are not going to pick any fruit from the dead sticks that have fallen to the ground. Only those living branches that draw nutrition and strength from the vine will bear fruit. It is only when we abide in the true Vine, Jesus Christ, that we are able to bear fruit.

A living branch that is connected to a living vine will naturally bear fruit. A necessary, yet painful, process is the pruning process. The purpose of this process called pruning is to allow the branch to produce even more fruit. A plant in the midst of being pruned might say, "Ouch. Why are you cutting me? That hurts. Stop it."

We humans don't appreciate the pruning process either. It is painful. Your loving Vinedresser in heaven only cuts off things that are useless, although they may seem useful and necessary to you. He only prunes off things that rob you of your strength and spiritual nourishment. Like a surgeon, He does the delicate work of removing the destructive tissue that might hinder our reliance on Him. Much of the Lord's pruning we just don't understand at the time.

I caught up with an old friend who was at the Pastor's conference last week. I knew Greg and Jodi from attending church youth events at Immanuel, Grand Forks when I was in high school. They helped with youth events at Immanuel. They were a source of friendship and encouragement at those circuit events. This is how Greg filled me in on events in his life since I left for college in 1984.

I had three healthy children Beth would have been 3 yrs Todd was 5 yrs and Michelle was 7. Beth developed epilepsy that year and has struggled ever since. Her development was delayed as a result of the epilepsy. Her bones were also severely undeveloped. However, she is 25 soon, still lives with us, and she is so happy in her own little world. She wakes up with a smile every day and gives anyone a smile that is with her.

When Michelle was 13, she came home from Basketball practice with a bad headache. I asked Jodi to check on her as I was on my way out to snow machine the river. Sometime later I got to Oslo and my business partner's dad was waiting for us in his vehicle. He said I should come to the hospital with him. He would not tell me anything as he did not know anything, so I did not have a clue what was going on. It was a very long drive. Those 30 miles back to Grand Forks seemed like an eternity.

We got to the emergency room and I walked through a sea of relatives and friends that had been called and shot up to the hospital. The room was full. I was dropping my coats and stuff on the floor as I walked to the room number one in a daze. I rounded the corner and saw little Michelle on life support and not breathing. I went to her side and told her I love her... must have been about ten or eleven times. I figured that God would put that into her mind for me. The situation was dreadful as I was sure she was gone.

My cousin, an RN came up to me and told me she was still alive. She must have known that I thought she was gone by the blank look on my face. The news did not get better. We went over the brain scan photos and the tech just bowed her head and said that this is not good. We were told by the best docs if she lived she would be a vegetable.

Jodi and I trusted God's plan and told him we understood whatever He wanted we would accept. Michelle made it through a few tough days at GF hospital and then was taken to Rochester. She had to wait until they figured she was stable enough to operate. The day of the operation to seal the bleed is a day I will never forget. I was so sure she would not make it thought the surgery. I remember the surgeon coming out of the operating room with his head down. We were sitting in a waiting room. I ran down the hall to meet him. The suspense was too much to wait. I looked up at him and asked him, "Did she make it?" He pulled his mask off and said she is still alive. It was a long road from there. Before we left Rochester they were referring to her as the miracle child. We were given a second chance with her. She is so special.

We never gave up on God and no matter the outcome we trusted the plan. Every day after she came to was better than the day before. Over the course of time she learned to walk and talk all over again. She never complained one time and to this day still never has. God is good. It was a drain on us for sure. I used to say you don't understand the true meaning of the word love until you lose a loved one in the blink of an eye without getting a chance to say good bye and square up with everything. Good lesson for all of us and I have said I do not want to ever forget that valuable lesson. For years, every time I looked at her as she went through life with vigor trying to regain what she once had I would just be in awe..... God is great and we are so very fortunate he gave her back to us. You would not believe the prayer chains that went out across the nation. You could feel the power of God at work. It was so comforting. I still look at her today almost 15 years later in simple amazement. She now is a married, UND graduate and a department store manager in Fargo.

As Greg was telling the story I expected to hear him say that she didn't survive. I breathed a sigh of relief when he got to the end of the story. The Lord gave the Mattsons the strength to endure a very difficult time and they have grown in their trust and joyful service to the Lord. Greg is now chairman of the congregation at Immanuel Lutheran Church. When the storms of life rage, it is necessary to draw near to Christ.

There is another chapter to this story about Michelle Mattson. Greg and Jodi flew to Hawaii with Michelle and her husband Spencer. During the flight between Seattle and Maui, Greg struck up a conversation with the woman in the seat next to him. She said that her name was Dr. Johnson and that she worked at Mayo. He told her that they had two daughters who were blessed by the work of Mayo doctors. He pointed to Michelle who was four rows ahead of them and said, She is a UND graduate and now married and living in Fargo.

He went into the details about Michelle's ordeal. He explained how she had suffered a severe brain aneurysm that burst and how they nearly lost her. She asked him the name of the surgeon. He came to discover that the surgeon was on the plane with them. He was seated just a row behind Michelle.

Greg and Jodi approached the man and confirmed who he was. He went on to tell him that he had saved their little girl's life some 15 years earlier. He remembered the case and recalled receiving a wedding invitation from her.

While Greg was visiting with the surgeon, Jodi went up to tell Michelle of their discovery. Greg said that he could see her tearing up as she looked in his direction. He watched in amazement as he watched his daughter approach the man for the first time, who, by the grace of God saved her life. Greg writes of the meeting, "We were all so thankful to God for giving us the chance to thank him and show him the miracle from God that she was. All of us had for so long wanted this humble man to see the miracle himself and to give him a hug. Who would ever know that God would arrange this meeting at 37,000 miles over the Pacific Ocean fifteen years later?"

This is just one example of the Lord pruning back the branches so that more fruit could be borne. The Lord didn't forsake the Mattsons at any time during their experience. He was faithful throughout. That is His promise to us as well.

Some of you might remember the 3 day blizzard in 1966. The cattle shed on our farm is about 150 feet from our house. Dad tied a rope from the house to the shed so that he could find the shed and feed the cattle. In conditions where he could barely see, Dad would hold tightly onto the rope that would lead him back to the safety and warmth of the house. In blizzard conditions, to lose one's grip on the rope is to put one's life at risk. With windchills approaching -50, it wouldn't take long for a person to succumb to the elements and die.

And yet some of our loved ones have died by accident or disease. Christians are persecuted and killed for the faith. We might consider this to be the worst pruning of all. Even this, the cutting off of your earthly life, is nothing but transplanting you into far richer soil, into eternal joys. The book of Revelation talks about tree bearing fruit 12 times a year. What joy our farmers would have if they could harvest every month. That is what awaits us in heaven. Those who seek to kill would only give you life.

I don't know how the Lord is pruning the branches in your life. You may have experienced some loss that will draw you back to His mercy and love. I heard it said this past week. We are all one phone call away from being driven to our knees in prayer. The devil prefers that we would be driven to despair. You see, he wants you to be one of those branches that has been severed from your life Vine. He is the great accuser. He will tell you that you are not worthy to come into God's presence. He wants you to wallow in your misery and look to the world's solutions for comfort. He would love nothing more than to have you be one of those dead sticks that are to be picked up, thrown into the eternal fire and burned.

That's why it is so important that we abide in Christ and His Word of truth. His Word shows us what perfect fruit looks like. It sets the example for us as we look to Christ, the perfect fruit bearer. On our own, we don't meet the standard. Apart from Him, the fruit that we bear is a bitter poison. By nature we seek to harm others or bring glory to ourselves. But now we are connected to the Life Vine. Even though we are the ones who have earned fiery punishment, Christ, the bearer of perfect fruit, was the One who was cut off from the tree on the cross.

Abiding in our life Vine means that His life blood flows through our veins. We are given the fruit of the vine in the Lord's Supper to cleanse and to strengthen us.

The Cross and Empty Tomb have transformed all things for you. The sting of death is no more. The wages of sin are not for you. The devil cannot destroy you.

In the midst of such enemies, remember that Christ cannot forsake you. Every branch that remains in Him has His life. He Himself has become the One True Vine in order to give His life to so that His vineyard would not be destroyed. He allowed Himself to be cut off for you. He was chopped down, severed at the trunk, on the Tree of Calvary. He suffered the fate of every diseased and warped and withered branch, even though He was perfect, healthy and full of life and fruit. He took destruction and death upon His own body on the Tree. He suffered the worst of all tribulations as He was crucified, so that you will never suffer it.

Then He grew back again, as He sprouted up to new life on Easter. A plant or tree that is cut off may grow back again from the stump. Christ, the True Vine, is even more full of life than any earthly plant. He could not be permanently destroyed, since His roots go unimaginably deep, even to all eternity.

No wonder He could declare, “Already you are clean because of the word I spoke to you.” (v. 3) Those waters of our Baptism combined with the Word are a cleansing Word. We have been bathed in Christ. In Baptism, a new branch sprouted and emerged from the living Vine. We continue to be nurtured and fed as we abide in the Word. It is in the inspired, written Word of God that we are shown our sin through the perfect of Law of God. It is here that we also are told of the amazing love of God, “that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him.” (1 John 4:9) We also abide in the Word made flesh as we eat His body and drink of the fruit of the Vine in His Supper. Where is God and how can we get close to Him? Where he tells us... in His Word and in the sacraments. These are the gifts of strength and life so that we might bear abundant fruit. To abide in the Word is to abide in the living Vine as we bring glory to the Father by bearing fruit.

Today we give thanks to the Lord for our mothers who have borne much fruit through their tender nurture and care for us as children. Through their selfless acts of love, their example of devotion to Christ, and words that speak of His love for us sinners, we have been drawn time and again to our life Vine.

Since this One True Vine cannot be destroyed, therefore you, His branches, cannot be destroyed. While you remain in Him, no axe can chop you down, no fire can devour you, no disease can wither you. You are eternal, since the Lord, your True Vine, is eternal.

You will flourish and blossom and produce every kind of fruit, not only in this life, but in the unending life to come. You will outlast death and Satan, long after they are cast into the lake of fire. You will increase in health and strength forever and ever, because the risen Lord has given His life for you.