

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I spent the morning on Friday getting my lawn mower ready for the mowing season and my power washer ready for some long-neglected projects around the house. The lawn mower was pretty straightforward. I wiped down the engine, cleaned out the air filter (it was a mess), checked the oil (a little dirty, but still full), added gas, and replaced a missing bolt in the handle. After 5 or 6 pulls on the starter cord, it was off and running. I had wanted to sharpen the blade as well, but ran out of time. And that's because the power washer was not straightforward. And I kind of knew that that was going to be the case. Because, you see, I have not used the power washer since we moved here, and I knew that I had not emptied the tank of gas. I've been thinking for the past two summers that I really needed to do something about that, but never got around to it. So, I drained the fuel line, opened up the carburetor, emptied the fuel, and cleaned it out, and then put it all back together. I checked the air filter, which was clean, checked the spark plug connection, set it all up and connected to the water supply, and then attempted to start it up. Nothing. Switch was on, choke was pulled. Nothing. Yesterday morning I replaced the batter in the control panel. Still nothing. It's not working. I might have to take it to somebody, which would be a blow to my ego. But there's not much point in having this thing sit around my garage unless I can get it working. So it's either get it working or get rid of it.

It occurred to me as I was working on both the lawn mower and the pressure washer on Friday morning that there was a connection to this week's Gospel reading from John about the vine and the branches. Jesus in John's Gospel is also concerned that everything is connected and working properly in order to achieve the desired results. For me the desired results were getting the lawn mowed and the side of the house cleaned. For Jesus, the desired result is "bearing fruit," living in such a way that blesses others and gives glory to God. I want to lift up five things from this reading that help us to understand how Jesus is working on us the church to get us tuned up and ready for task to which we have been called.

First, Jesus focus in the eight verses we have in front of us this morning is that the disciples should "abide" in him like branches "abide" in a vine. Abide is a churchy word that doesn't make much of an appearance in normal speech. It means to remain, or stay, or live. "Continue to live in me," might be the best way to convey it. Or maybe, "stick with me." Stick with me like a branch sticks to a vine so that you can bear fruit. But even when we get it translated out of church-speak, it doesn't clear things up much. Just how are we supposed to "stick with Jesus"?

The answer for Luther and his collaborators was that what connects us to Jesus and the saving work of his death and resurrection is faith. And faith, as I said last week, is trust in the promise of God's love and forgiveness for Jesus' sake. When the gospel promise is communicated, faith is created by the Holy Spirit in those who hear the promise. And communicating the gospel promise is the church's chief task. So, abiding in Jesus means sticking with him by continually reminding ourselves and each other of his promises.

Second, pruning is what keeps us on task, and that happens through God's word. Now, I'm not much of a gardener, but I know a few talented gardeners, including my parents. Why do you prune? As I understand it, branches have a tendency to grow in ways that are not helpful to bearing fruit. A lot of trees put out little sucker branches that take energy from the tree but don't help with producing fruit. In fact they take away from the fruit. And so they need to be pruned.

The kind of pruning Jesus' word does is what Lutherans call the Law: exposing our sinfulness and showing us our need for God's forgiveness. Like branches we have a tendency to go our own way, to pursue our own agendas. Pruning cuts away what isn't needed or helpful. It also keeps the branches close to the vine. This is why we use God's 2-fold word of Law and Gospel, but always with the final goal of communicating the Gospel.

Third, branches that are cut off are good only for the fire. That sounds scary. It sounds like a threat. It sounds like Jesus is saying that if you don't abide in him, if you don't trust in him, then you're headed for the fire, or "you know where." But I don't think that's really the intent here. Fear doesn't do a very good job of creating trust. I think that Jesus' goal here is to show us that we have a purpose. True life consists in bearing fruit. When we don't bear fruit, and don't want to bear fruit, we don't have the life God created us for.

Here's something else – and I realize that this goes beyond the text, but I believe it's consistent with the broader message of the New Testament: There is such a thing as grafting. Have you heard of that? I know we have some agricultural experts here who could tell you a lot more about this than I can. Grafting is when you take a branch that is cut off from one tree and you attach it to another tree, and it grows! You can even take branches from one kind of tree, like a lemon tree, and graft them onto a grapefruit tree. And they still bear lemons and not grapefruits. An arborist requires a living health branch for grafting. But unlike ordinary gardeners, God is able to graft even dead branches back onto a vine. In fact, you could say that each of us at baptism was a dead branch that was grafted onto the living vine of Christ.

Fourth, what Jesus is talking about here is communal, not individual. All of the "Yous" here are plural. "I am the vine and y'all are the branches," Jesus says. We have a strong tendency in our culture to individualize passages like this. To make them about me and Jesus. But this passage isn't so much about individual faith as it is about our faithfulness together as the church in sticking to our central task of making God's gospel promises so that faith can happen.

Fifth, before I finish I need to say something about Jesus telling his disciples, "Ask for whatever you wish." As we were looking at this text at On The Way on Thursday evening, someone asked if this was "prosperity Gospel" – the kind of theology that insists that God wants to bless you with health and wealth, you just have to ask. It's sometimes called "name it and claim it" theology, or – as I just learned – "gab and grab." I think the answer is a firm "no." That's not what Jesus means here.

I think that becomes clear when we keep in mind the context. Jesus cannot mean that we should pursue our own agendas and recruit God as our helper, because that contradicts the point of the rest of this passage, to say nothing of the rest of the Gospel. What Jesus means is that we when abide in him through faith, he will give us everything we need in order to bear the fruit that we are called to bear. When we abide in him, as I said last week, we align ourselves with his values and his mission. So this is NOT license to selfishly serve ourselves. How could it be? How would that make sense, given everything else Jesus is saying here?

What Jesus is saying is this: The church's central task is seeing to it that we "abide in Jesus," that we remain connected to him by faith. We do this by centering our communal life in him, through his means of grace, his word and his sacraments. This is how we "stick to him" as the church and as individuals. We are called to be the church on the corner of Branch and Vine, communicating the promises of God's forgiveness, love, and peace. Because when the branches abide in the vine, then everything is hooked up properly, and God can use us to bring forth fruit to heal our broken world. May God grant us grace to be faithful to that task, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.