

5th Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-8

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Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

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

Today's Gospel reading on this 5th Sunday of Easter, the image of the vine and the branches, is a graphic illustration of the new reality that is now before us because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. In a little exercise we did back in January in the Adult Sunday School class, this text made my list of go-to Bible passages. For many years now it has helped me to think about the nature of our relationship to God and how that changes our lives. This time around I was struck by something in the text I hadn't really paid much attention to before, and which makes this passage even richer for me. It's the final verse: "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." One of the difficulties we face in hearing verses like this is the word "glorified." It's one of those churchy words that we don't tend to use in everyday speech. And when we do use it, it tends to be in an ironic or sarcastic way. What it really means to glorify God is to make God look good, to bolster God's reputation. When we bear good fruit, it reflects well on God. God gets good P.R. And that's really where I want to start with this text. Jesus telling his disciples to abide in him, to depend on him, to trust in him, implies that there is a danger that they will not abide in him, or that they are already failing at this task. And events will bear that out. When Jesus is arrested, betrayed by Judas, the rest of his disciples abandon him and Peter even denies him.

If this could happen to Jesus' original disciples, it can certainly happen to us. In our Gospel reading next week, which begins where today's reading leaves off, we learn what Jesus has in mind by "good fruit." He means that he intends for his disciples to "love one another as [he] has loved [them]," and that people will know that they are Jesus' disciples by the love that they have for one another. Maybe you learned that song in Sunday School, "they'll know we are Christians by our love." The problem is, that is not actually how Christians are always known. These days Christians are known not for loving one another and the world God loves, but for our intolerance of people who are different from us. We are known for attempting to impose our cultural norms and assumptions on the society at large, and hypocrisy – for not actually living up to the standards we'd like to impose on others. We're known for pitting faith against science, for indulging all manner of conspiracy theories, and for crying "persecution!" when our assumed privilege is challenged.

Now I imagine that your response to what I have just said is, "yeah, but we're not *those* kinds of Christians at Grace." I hear you. I think you're right about that. I don't claim those more extreme views either. But the reality is that among the increasingly non-religious, unchurched segment of the population, Christianity is known by its loudest, most extreme voices, and people aren't generally interested in distinguishing between *those* kinds of Christians and *our* kind. Our denomination is called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Evangelical is the first word in our name. It doesn't matter to most people that Lutherans were the original Evangelicals, that we had the name first, and that it means that we are committed to proclaiming and living out the Good News of God's love for the world in Jesus. (And to be fair, modern day Evangelicals would also say that they are centered in the Good News.) But for many other people today, the term Evangelical has taken on a different meaning. To them it means socially conservative, intolerant, simple-minded, sexist, racist, and homophobic. There are not a few people in our church body who think we should give up the word. Evangelical has been given a bad name, they say, and these days it gives *God* a bad name.

If we aren't *those* kinds of Christians, though, neither are we innocent of reflecting badly on the one we claim to follow. Because if we are really honest, even *our* kinds of Christians don't bear the fruit of love that God desires. We don't love God with our whole heart or our neighbors as ourselves because we are too busy focusing on ourselves, on our "success," our private lives, our happiness, and our security. Other people, especially *different* people, we often see as competitors or threats, when we think about them at all, or at best, as none of our business. The last thing we want is to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers. And we often treat God only as a means to our ends, the aider and abettor of our personal agendas, as if God were a genie in a lamp whose only purpose was to grant us wishes or get us out of a jam.

To use Jesus' imagery in this Gospel reading, we do not "abide" in Jesus, we do not trust and rely on God, but in other things, things Martin Luther called false gods: things like wealth, power, and violence, which we imagine will save us – if not from sin and death, at least from being needy and vulnerable in an unfriendly and scary world. By our lifestyles and attitudes we promote those false gods, and give the true God a bad name. And because we don't abide in Jesus, we are like those dead, fruitless branches, like the dried-up sticks I'm constantly collecting from my back yard, good only for the burn pile or the yard waste collection.

It is only when we face the music, acknowledge that this really is true about us, recognize that without a miracle, we are in fact hopeless – it is only then that we can begin to hear the Good News that Jesus is pointing to in today's text. That's the place the disciples found themselves in too. And here's the miracle: on the cross, Jesus too was thrown on the burn pile, with us and for us, bearing the shame of the disciples' unfaithfulness and ours, and the deadly consequences of our misplaced allegiances. But because that was not the end of his story, as we know, it was not the end of the disciples' story either, or of ours. Astonishingly, Jesus the resurrected vine does not give up on dried up, disconnected branches, but says to them, "Abide in me!" And for his sake, God the vinedresser does what no human gardener can do, and grafts us dead, broken-off branches back onto the vine.

In the big picture of our lives of faith, this is what it means for us to be the branches to Jesus' vine. We're not branches who have sprouted and grown without incident from the beginning until today. We are branches that have fallen of and been restored, lovingly grafted back into the source of life. Grafting, I'm told, is a delicate process. It takes time and attention for the grafted branch to take hold. It can't be rushed or forced. And that is true of faith too, which is the connective force in Jesus' analogy that makes us abide in him. It takes time, attention, and nurturing by the Good News of God's love and forgiveness, which is the central task of the church. But when it works, when faith takes hold in us, then good fruit happens. We can't help it. God's love for us flows through us to be shared with others. And holding tight to Christ the vine we begin letting go of all those other things we thought would save us or give us comfort. And when *that* happens, God is glorified. God gets good P.R. and a good name. But here's the thing about that that we often miss. God doesn't need to be praised and glorified for *God's* sake. God is not an egomaniac or a narcissist. When God is glorified, when people see God's goodness flowing through us, then they too are drawn to Christ the vine to receive with us the life that God has intended for all of us all along. God's glory, you see, is for the sake of the world that God loves in Jesus Christ.

So then, let us cling to Christ the vine through faith, trusting the promise of God's love and giving glory to God by the good fruit that we bear. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the risen Christ Jesus. Amen.