

Entangled Branches

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2018

John 15:1-8

[Jesus said,] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

Jesus is the vine, we are the branches.

No branch lives on its own. Take a branch away from the vine and it's no longer a branch, it's kindling.

No branch binds itself to the vine. A vine can grow new branches, branches can be grafted into the vine, but no branch makes itself part of the vine.

He is the vine. You are his branch. Engrafted into him, that you have his life.

To be a branch to the vine Jesus is to be one who receives all life from him. When we are dead in our sin, when we have no life of our own, to be grafted into him is to have our sin forgiven and to be joined to his resurrected life. It is his all the way, his work, his doing. His grafting us into himself by Baptism, his cleaning us with forgiveness, his sustaining us with the promise of life, his keeping us as his own—the work is his all the way. It is grace.

So we will have life as we remain in the vine, in Jesus. Apart from him, it's only death. John 15:6:

[Jesus said,] ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

As we abide in Jesus—and this is not hard work, it is only a branch daily receiving life from the vine—as we abide in Jesus, he makes us his servants. This is simply the life of daily receiving the gift of repentance and forgiveness from the Vine.

No branch produces fruit of itself. A branch broken from a vine gives no grapes. But through the branch, the vine gives grapes. The vine will give grapes anyway. Break off one branch, and it grows another for the next season. The vine will do what vines do—it will live and produce and give gifts. But to be a branch on the vine is to be one who is honored by the vine to be the instrument by which the vine does its work.

The vine is the source of life, the giver of gifts. The branches serve the vine. Jesus is the vine, you are his branch. He is the source of life, through you, his branch, he is giving gifts. So we all, as his branches, are living from the vine and giving gifts.

But look at the branches on this vine. We see entanglements.

We are branches of the true vine, and he is clean and holy. And by his word he makes us holy. We abide in him as we hold onto his word of Gospel, as we cling to his word of forgiveness, and as we remain holy as he cleanses us with his Word.

Yet we remain in our sinful flesh. By faith, we are clean branches—branches living from the Vine, his servants, bringing forth good fruit. Yet, at the same time, we remain in our sinful flesh. And the sinful flesh is a twisted, dead branch, fit for the fire. In our life of flesh, we remain as these branches not rejoicing in bringing forth good fruit, not finding our joy in serving other, but in having our own way.

So we, good and clean branches of the living vine, Christ Jesus, as we are engrafted to the Vine, we live as branches entangled with each other. And that means, entangled with one another not only in our faith and fellowship in Christ Jesus, but also entangled in our sin.

Because Jesus doesn't have any artificial people in his Church. He has real flesh and blood people, with all the sin and weakness they bring with them. He has you and me. And he binds us to himself. In this, he binds us to one another, and to our brothers and sisters in the Church throughout the world. For each of us are a branch to him, the Vine, only as we are branches also with each other. For this Vine, Christ Jesus, died for all, and has many branches to whom he is bringing life.

This, then, is a difficult entangled life, where we are ready to make sure that other branches have the appearance of clean, that other branches follow even the smallest rule, while we ourselves look for our own way—all the while forgetting that the first rule the Lord gives us is, "*Love your neighbor as yourself, desiring not sacrifice, but mercy.*"

This then, this life of being entangled with other sinners in the Church, being grafted into the Vine who came to give life to those who are dead, to cleanse those who would otherwise be thrown into the fire—this is the life the Apostle John describes in his letter to the Church:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

[1 John 4:7]

Branches grafted to the Vine. Branches fit for the fire, but now cleansed and made whole.

Branches living from the Vine, who is the propitiation, that is, who is the merciful atonement for our sins; we have our life from the Vine who binds us to himself and to one another—he makes us branches along with one another. We bring our sin, our entanglements with shame, to him, to the Vine, for his word of forgiveness and cleansing.

We are branches along with one another, none of us making ourselves to be a branch, but all of us engrafted by the vine, Jesus. It is pure grace.

Now, abiding in him, drawing our life from his word of forgiveness, we serve one another with this same word of forgiveness, so that even through our voices, the Lord is cleansing his branches as they speak forgiveness and kindness among themselves.

This is what it means to be a branch to the vine, Jesus: it means to know that this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atonement for our sin. This is the love God has manifested toward us, so that as he loves us, so we love one another.

This is what it means to be a branch to the vine, Jesus: to be bound to Jesus as a branch as to a vine, to be bound to one another, as branches of the same vine. So that, as we look at one another, and even as we see sin or shame, we then look to the vine from which we all draw life, and we see only his righteousness, when we look at another and see shame, we then look to the vine and see only mercy and honor, and as branches along with one another to the vine, we now count each other not according to our sin, but according to the righteousness of Christ Jesus, our vine, from which we all have our life.

He is the Vine; you are his branch; you are clean.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.