

John 15:1-8May 3, 2015 – 5th SUNDAY OF EASTER

Like Branches on the Vine

✠ **Pruned to be productive** (vv.1-4)

✠ **Glorious fruit from God** (vv.5-8)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

It was last Thursday evening toward the end of a momentous meeting of our Board for Lay Ministry. The brothers were very concerned that as much information as possible be given to the congregation to understand how important our Voters' meeting is today. I smiled and told them, "This is one reason I love being a pastor; I get to share these things." They couldn't hear me laughing inside with delight. I didn't want to prolong the meeting with details, but the Holy Spirit saw all this coming and put today's sermon text in my worship planning months ago. I can't think of these things. I often don't even know what to pray for. But our good and gracious God loves to bless *"immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."* (Ephesians 3:20f NIV84)

It was Thursday evening of Holy Week, Maundy-Mandate-Command Thursday, when Jesus spoke these priceless verses on their way out of Jerusalem toward the Mount of Olives. Jesus was about to pour out His heart to our Father in heaven before He poured out His blood on the cross to wash our sins away. He wanted us to see and feel how close we really are to God: **Like Branches on the Vine.**

✠ **Pruned to be productive** (vv.1-4)

Over the centuries God's chosen nation of Israel had become like a *"corrupt, wild vine."* (Jeremiah 2:21 NIV84) False prophets had led them away from God with sermons that sounded so good and relevant in people's ears, but were filled with lies their preachers made up to make them feel good. So Jesus, the Son of God, sets the record straight with one of His famous **I AM** statements in the Gospel account of John: *"I AM the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."* God the Father and God the Son are so intimately connected along with God the Holy Spirit that they all work together to save us.

"Every branch that does not bear fruit, he cuts off." There have always been souls like Judas who were taught God's Word but did not listen with faith. Their ears heard, but their hearts rejected the message of repentance and solid trust in Jesus for time and eternity. These the Father *"cuts off."*

"And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit." My coach in college asked me to prune his pear tree. "When you think you're done," Coach Thompson said, "go over the branches again and cut off more." So I did, then asked him what he thought. "Do it again," he said. "When it looks almost bare, the sap will go into the few remaining branches and bear great pears."

Friends, if that pear tree could sing a song with the grape branches the Father prunes, they'd be crying, "You cut me back so hard I feel naked and bare! Do you really know what you're doing?" Don't you feel that way sometimes? Don't we as a congregation feel God's disciplines that takes away branches who looked so fresh and green and leafy? But our heavenly Father knows what He is doing. For Christians and for congregations **Like Branches on the Vine** we're **Pruned to be productive.**

When God's pruning shears start cutting away branches in your life, don't feel the Lord is punishing you. Jesus says, *"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."* Pruning in the Greek original also means to *cleanse*. A vine like a pear tree is "dirty" with sucker branches poking out here there and everywhere. They suck up the sap, but bear no fruit. With God's Word Jesus prunes us

clean to **be productive** hearers and doers of God's Word. He washes away our sins and cleans our soul in Baptism. He wants our families and friends to feel new kindness and love when we take His Holy Supper of fresh forgiveness. So Jesus says, *"Remain in my, and I in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain on the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me."*

A pastor wanted to illustrate this to his congregation. Early one Sunday morning he cut a branch from his grape arbor and took it to church. Before worship even began that branch had withered. The pastor was amazed how quickly it happened. This is so true of our life with God. Either you are a branch growing on Christ the Vine, **Pruned to be productive** and bearing fruit for God, or you are dead and dying, withering away fruitless like Judas who finally fell into despair. God wants better for you:

✠ Glorious fruit from God (vv.5-8)

"I AM the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him, this one bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing." More times than I can count this word of my Lord has sustained me in my personal faith life and my service as a pastor at New Life. From the very beginning kind hearted members have been saying, "Pastor, we need to get you some help." There's been so much work to do, so many opportunities in our communities and world wide mission of the WELS, that added staff always seemed desirable. Having Jill as our Administrative Assistant, coordinating our vibrant lay ministry has been a huge help – really part of our Lord keeping His promise to bear *"much fruit"* for Him. Sadly, I've found that if I push too hard on some perceived need or "really bright idea" of mine, I usually wish I had waited. I've seen how other congregations can suffer from pastoral staff that does not work well together. More staff does not necessarily mean more **fruit for God**. But isn't that part of our problem. We think of bearing our puny-minded **fruit for God** instead of **Glorious fruit from God**.

It's frightening to think how far we could go in our sin if we fell off the Vine of our dear Lord Jesus, or if our heavenly Father were not so skillful in His gardening. Jesus says, *"If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."* As Jesus warns against false prophets in His *Sermon on the Mount*: *"Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."* (Matthew 7:17-20 NIV84) In a productive orchard or vineyard it's not far from a dead, fruitless tree or vine – to the fire. From this our Lord has saved us.

So what should I do when I'm falling short in outreach, wishing I knew more about worship, longing for training in long range planning – but lacking the time to do more? Here's my Savior's answer for you and me in our lives together with God: *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* Again and again, as I've turned my worries and cares over to God, He has provided help, often by bringing new members to New Life. I'm amazed how the gifts He gives our newest members even surpass the needs I perceived. God is good! And now He has brought us to where we can seriously consider adding a part-time associate pastor, even showing one who wants part-time ministry and is especially skilled in strategic planning, outreach, and worship.

All this can bring you great comfort in your personal life too. Many of our members are carrying burdens on their hearts for loved ones who are not with the Lord. We take our Lord's warning about the fire seriously for ourselves and in fear for straying family members. But remember, dear **Branches on the Vine**, it is by God that we are **Pruned to be productive**. And we branches cannot make ourselves or other branches bear **Fruit for God**. Jesus reassures us, *"My Father is glorified by this: that you bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples."* Trust God's grace to guide you in loving deeds and kind words as He graces us with **Glorious fruit from God**. Pray, praise and give thanks in God's Word – always bearing **Glorious fruit from God** as **Branches on the Vine**. I am His + He is mine. Amen.