

When Jesus says, ***I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing,*** I don't believe it is difficult to understand the imagery. Jesus, ***the vine***, is the source of our spiritual life. We, the ***branches*** will grow and flourish spiritually only as long as we stay attached, or connected to Him. And the stronger and longer we are attached, the more we grow and produce fruit. That's it in a nutshell. But if I said 'Amen' right now, though some might cheer, it is to our spiritual growth and eternal good to explore Jesus' horticultural comparison a little further. And as we do so...

Dear Friends in Christ,

First, in this exposition are strong words of encouragement. Within these 8 verses, the word ***remain*** is used 8 times, and the idea of us ***remaining in Christ*** is mentioned 5 times. By repeating this statement again and again Jesus is issuing each of us, as believers, a call for exertion, diligence and effort when it comes to strengthening our relationship with Him. When Jesus calls on us to ***remain in Him***, He is saying that this is something we can do. He is suggesting that *there are steps we can take to remain in Him*.

First and foremost, we remain connected to Him through being actively involved in Word and Sacrament. We're talking worship, Bible study, small groups, personal devotions, daily contemplation of Christ and what He has done for us through His life, death and resurrection. These activities keep us close to Him through his Word. But also, taking the Lord's Supper regularly and thoughtfully keeps us close to Him. An active prayer life keeps us talking with Jesus. *All of it, helps us "remain in Him."*

Now, this may sound simple, self-evident, even painfully obvious. But keep in mind how hard it is to live such an activated life. Understand, behind Jesus' call is the

correlation that we can and will remain deeply, actively connected to Christ...but only to the proportion that we make our relationship with Him a priority in our lives. Now that's a mouthful, so let me say it again...

I think a lot of us just went from "Word and Sacrament, pastor? No problem. I'm good." To "Wait, what? C'mon, that puts more of an expectation on me than I'm really ready to take on." And, quite frankly, that's true for a lot of us. I mean, for a lot of us, as long as remaining in Christ is easy and convenient to our schedules, great! But if it takes work and schedule changes and sacrifice...well, few of us have that bring-it-on, step-up-to-the-challenge, do-what-it-takes mentality all on our own.

But don't worry. God has a plan. In the second verse of our text Jesus talks about how the ***Father***, as the Heavenly Gardener, makes an active branch even more fruitful by trimming it clean. Now I'm not much of a gardener, but even I know that for a plant to grow strong and healthy you have to pinch off the offshoots and the excess branches. Too many of them rob the main plant (or branch) of its strength and vitality and stunt its growth.

But now apply that kind of illustration to our spiritual lives. We have to be aware of the distractions and offshoots that rob us of our spiritual vitality... that keep us from developing and properly cultivating our spiritual lives... that sap the strength of our activation in Christ.

It's an interesting phenomenon indeed that in this age of time and labor saving devices, the malady of "stress" and stress-related problems are at an all-time high. It seems that most of us feel we have too much to do with too little time to do it. And so something has to go. And if that something is related to cultivating our spiritual lives...well, it's *hard* to grow and *easy* to slip into *apathy*.

Some years ago a man by the name of Charles Hummel wrote a piece entitled: "The Tyranny of the Urgent." In it, he makes a distinction between the "urgent" and the "important." He wrote:

We live in constant tension between the urgent and the important. The problem is that the important task rarely must be done today, or even this week. Extra hours of prayer and Bible study, a visit with that non-Christian friend, careful study of an important book: these projects can wait. But the urgent tasks call for instant action – endless demands pressure every hour and day...

...The momentary appeal of [urgent] tasks seems irresistible and important, and they devour our energy. But in the light of time's perspective their deceptive prominence fades; with a sense of loss we recall the important tasks pushed aside. We realize we've become slaves to the tyranny of the urgent.

There really is nothing more important than our relationship with Jesus Christ as our Savior. He is the One who lived for us and died for our sins. He is the One who now, at this very moment, lovingly oversees our lives and awaits us to join Him in the heavenly mansion He has prepared for us. And until that time He calls us to forego the *urgent* things in order to fulfill the one *important* task of **remaining in Him**.

And as we do, He attaches a promise. **Remain in me, and I will remain in you**. What a promise this is, and what a piece of assurance. Jesus says, "Stay connected to Me, and I promise I'll stay connected to you." Jesus originally spoke these words to His disciples on Maundy Thursday. Earlier that same evening He said something similar (recorded in John 14): **If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him**. I'm not sure if we have the capability of fully understand what Jesus is telling us here, but in its simplest terms, what a beautiful thought! Christ lives within us and remains in us as we remain in Him...

The result of this intimate connection with Christ is stated in these words: **If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit**. And later on, **This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples**. And

this activation fruit that comes naturally from a branch connected to Jesus the vine is both on the inside and the outside.

You see, inwardly, the activation fruit of a connection with Christ is the knowledge of our salvation. We know who Jesus Christ is and what He has done for us. We know **the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich**. We know what will happen and where we will be the moment after we close our eyes in death. We know that we are but strangers here, and that heaven is our home. So, be activated on the inside. In this knowledge...be at peace...be joyful... be hopeful...be content...be confident...

And be activated, not just on the inside, but on the outside, too. Because inward fruit cannot help but show itself outwardly. You see, those who know Christ and are deeply connected to Him through Word and Sacrament, who share with him regularly in prayer...you will reflect your relationship with Jesus in your life by simply doing what comes naturally to a branch connected to the vine: bearing fruit...

A little girl on her way home from church turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, the preacher's sermon this morning confused me." When the mother asked why, the girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than us. Is that true?" Her mother replied that yes that was true. "He also said God lives within us. Is that true, too?" Again the mother replied yes... "Well," said the girl, "If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?" And the answer *Jesus* gives is yes. As we stay closely connected to Him, He will show through us, through the natural fruits of our faith.

We have before us today as tangible way to demonstrate the very fruit-bearing that Jesus is talking about. As you came into church today, you were handed a time and talents survey. These surveys have been developed to help each of us not only take the time to think about the talents with which we have been blessed, but also to help

identify for each other opportunities to put those talents to use, ***to the Father's glory, bearing fruit, showing ourselves to be Jesus' disciples.*** If you haven't done so already, please take the time right now to fill it out. Then, when the offering plate comes around, place it in the plate, recognizing that using your talents to serve the Lord and others is an offering, too.

[Survey]

Keep in mind: The goal with these surveys is not to obligate anyone to specific or mandatory service. Rather, the goal is to help each of our members bear fruit by serving in many, various, and self-identified ways. Signing up doesn't equal a specific commitment. Rather, it makes it easier to connect you with opportunities to serve.

My friends, recognize and rejoice at what the Lord is doing in his vineyard, the vine and the branches together. Just as he encourages and promises, Jesus is carrying it out *in* each of us and outwardly *through* each of us. ***If you remain in [him, his] words [will] remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to [the] Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be [Jesus'] disciples.*** He is the vine, we are the branches. May God give all of us the will, the power and the strength to bear fruit, now and always. Amen.