

TEXT: John 15:1-3

THEME: STAY CONNECTED TO JESUS

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you" (John 15:1-3).

Dear Christian Friends (and especially our Youth Confirmands):

I once had a houseplant that just loved to grow. If I just tended it mildly, watered it regularly, and fertilized it occasionally, it would grow into a bush. It was colorful, vigorous, and attractive; it looked good. But that's not all it could be.

If left alone, it would grow like a weed, but if it were pruned—cut back—something better happened. Every time I pruned it, it would blossom like crazy. If you didn't realize that would happen, you might question why such a healthy-looking plant should be pruned, should be bothered at all. But pruning let the plant do what it was supposed to do—bloom!

Jesus says, **"My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch."** There are a number of reasons to cut off branches, but this is the one I want to focus on: so that **"every branch that does bear fruit...will be even more fruitful."**

When you suffer...some of you have suffered very little in life, others a bit more, and a few of you have already suffered a great deal..., it can be hard to remember that the Father prunes for good. When you suffer—when things are being pruned, cut, and removed—it can be hard to remember that the pruning is for the glory of God and that the suffering is totally under his control. When you get laughed at and ridiculed for believing the Bible and its account of creation instead of the "science" of the theory of evolution, which is bad science, it can hurt; laughter and ridicule can cut like a knife. When you lose a friend or two, or five or six, because you won't abuse alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs with them, you might wonder if obeying God is really worth it. When one you really care about leaves you because as a child of God you won't have sex outside of marriage, even though so many other people are, you can feel really cut off and alone. That's when it is hard to believe that the Pruner really loves you.

Jesus wants every one of us, his disciples, to believe: **"My Father is the gardener."** One of the Father's expressions of love is to prune. Sometimes he prunes lightly; sometimes he prunes deeply; sometimes it is pretty painless; sometimes it nearly kills.

I am reminded of a young student at Michigan Lutheran Seminary who was severely injured in a car accident on a trip back to her home in Tawas one night. She was smart, athletic, energetic, pretty, and planning to become a Lutheran elementary school teacher...but now she was paralyzed, confined to a wheel-chair for the rest of her life. She was pruned, cut back, but she bloomed bigger and brighter than ever. She went on to become a Lutheran elementary school teacher, graduating from Martin Luther College last year, married a WELS pastor, and is teaching at Beautiful Savior Lutheran School in Cincinnati, Ohio. Think of what an inspiration she is to every student who may have a physical handicap...all because God the Father pruned her.

Your Father, my Father, Christ's Father, is the Gardener. He knows exactly what he is doing. He cut off Jesus Christ from the land of the living, making his life a guilt offering for our sins. The guilt offering was a success. Jesus is alive and so are all of us who trust in him. Your guilt is gone, and

because he lives, you too will live. As your heavenly Gardener tends you, you will live even more fruitfully for him. You will blossom and bloom and bear fruit.

This past week I looked up all the lists of our youth confirmands at Trinity over the past ten years and I prayed for each person on those lists. Some of them I see each week right here in worship. Others I see once in awhile. Some I see once or twice a year. A few have not been in church since their Confirmation Day, the day they stood before the Lord's altar and promised to remain faithful to him their whole life. I prayed for each of you. It breaks my heart to think that any one of you may never worship here with us again. But I know it can happen. It even happened to Jesus.

Jesus spoke the words of our text today as he walked with his disciples to Gethsemane the last time. But not all of his disciples were there. One was conspicuously absent—Judas Iscariot. He had been separated from the disciples before they left the upper room. Perhaps we could even say he's been separated long before that, because **“Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus” (Luke 22:4).**

Judas' heart was already beginning to produce fruit—rotten fruit. His lifeline was not connected to Jesus Christ but to sin and unbelief. For three years Judas had been with Jesus, hearing him teach and preach, seeing him heal and bless. But no fruit had come from Judas. Judas' heart had been clothed by sin, an apparent lust for the money bag, and a lack of trust in the words and actions of his Master, our Savior Jesus. **Jesus replied, “Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!” (John 6:70).**

On that Maundy Thursday evening, the word of Jesus cleansed the vine of an unfruitful branch—Judas. As Jesus stated, **“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you” (John 15:3).** But that cleansing was not done without great care. Jesus had tried to cleanse Judas, too. **“I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me,”** he said. Then a little later, **“The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.”** And again, **“Yes, it is you.”** Then, finally, **“What you are about to do, do quickly” (John 15:21-27).** Jesus tried to warn Judas, to cleanse him, to prune him, but Judas refused pruning. Don't be like Judas! Don't be like so many others who have stood before this altar, made their sincere promises, and then betrayed Jesus!

God still uses his word to cleanse the vine. Paul described the cleansing of Christ's bride in Christian Baptism as **“the washing with water through the word” (Ephesians 5:26).** The writer to the Hebrews spoke about the Word of God as **“sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:12).** The law of God cuts the dirty hearts of sinners wide open so that every infection of sin is uncovered.

His precious Word of Life is spoken to bring cleansing and healing to those same sinful hearts: **“The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, purifies us from all sins” (1 John 1:7).** Regular worship, use of the sacraments, and study of the Word keep us connected to the lifeline, to the atonement and resurrection of Christ, keep us CONNECTED TO JESUS. Only then will we bear acceptable fruit to the Gardener's glory. Amen.