

Now that the weather is getting warmer, more and more people are out in their yards. Raking up the sticks and dead grass. Taking out the rotatiller, and digging up the garden. Preparing to plant seed soon so that a nice garden will be supplying you with some good vegetables come summer. Here at Trinity, we have two member families that I am aware of that actually have vineyards in their back yards. In fact, one of these families supplies the wine for our communion wine from the grapes in that vineyard. But I would venture to say, that you yourself don't have a vineyard in your back yard. Vineyards are a rarity in the Bay City area. But travel to Israel in Jesus day, and you would find more vineyards on people's property than vegetable gardens. Back then, growing grapes was a very important industry – it was vital to Israel's economy. Everyone knew about growing grapes, and so Jesus used this as a picture to describe people in their relationship to him, and to God the Heavenly Father. Today we're going to look at this picture, and see how we fit in. My prayer today for all of us is that we, "Stay Connected to Jesus!"

The picture Jesus paints is a simple one. Jesus pictures himself as the main vine of the vineyard, and you are the branches that grow off of him. God the Father is the gardener. And there are different branches in the vineyard. First, there is the "throw-away branch." Verse 2 talks about God the Father, the gardener: "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit." Look again at verse 6: "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned." When a gardener is going through his vineyard, and he sees certain branches that never bear fruit, he cuts them off and throws them onto a pile, and eventually he burns that pile of dead branches. Jesus is painting a picture of people here. There are those who at one time were Christians in their lives. But then something happens to them. They stop producing fruits of faith. They stop obeying God. They stop living and talking in a Christian way. They start living and talking just like the rest of the unbelieving world. They stop producing fruits of faith in their lives.

Examine your connection to Jesus. How strong is it? Have the parasites of a busy schedule eaten into your connection with Jesus. Is the fungus of indifference and spiritual laziness cutting you off from the Vine? Instead of thinking about how close you can be to Jesus and how much fruit you can produce for him, do you wonder how little you have to do to still be a Christian and how much you can get away with? Listen to Jesus warning. "[My Father] cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit . . . If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:2, 6 NIV). Repent before you are a dead branch, ready to be cut off, picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. Believe that Jesus has taken away those sins. He went to the cross for you. He died in your place. His blood washes you clean. He rose because God forgives you. As your risen Savior, he wants to revitalize you. He wants his power and strength to flow through you so that you bear much fruit.

Why does this happen to people who at one time were Christians? The answer is verse 6: "If anyone does not remain in me..." Jesus tells us that anyone who does not continue to have contact with him, through his Word, through his Sacrament – if that happens – a person loses his faith and falls away. He stops bearing fruit and becomes a throw-away branch. Many years ago at the Tournament of Roses parade, the Standard Oil Company, now known as Chevron, had a beautiful float. In the middle of the parade the oil company's float came to a grinding halt and the rest of the parade with it. The problem? The float ran out of gas. The directors of the Chevron float had done everything well but they neglected to use their company's vast resources of oil. The parade waited while someone ran to get a gallon of gas. Too often, this is what

happens to Christians. They break down in the middle of their lives. They stop producing fruits of faith. They start living like unbelievers. Why? Well, for one they want to be accepted by their unbelieving friends, so they begin doing what they are doing. Partying on weekends, drinking a bit too much, and just trying to drain the last bit of fun out of life. Too tired on weekends, too much other stuff to do. As a result they neglect the one thing they need to keep their faith alive – and that is the Word, and the Sacrament. And as a result, they stop producing works of love. They are focused on their own lives and happiness. Anyone who lives this way is eventually picked up and thrown into the fire on Judgment Day. The question for you this morning, is what kind of branch are you? Are you producing fruits of faith in your life? Or, have you broken down, have you become disconnected from the vine?

How good it is that we can go to Christ, repent of our sins, and receive his forgiveness. This is exactly what we do at the beginning of our worship services. Through his Word, Jesus tells us that he has forgiven us. In verse 3 he says, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” You and I are clean, we are forgiven – because of the words Jesus Christ has spoken to us – that he has lived and died and risen – that is how he cleanses us.

But just because you are forgiven doesn’t mean that God will give you an easy life. There is the second kind of branch we are going to be looking at, the “pruned branch.” Verse 2: “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.” One of the jobs of a gardener is to prune the branches on the grapevine. He cuts off the dead ones, since they can be a place where bugs and disease grow. He gets rid of the insects, the moss, the parasites that would threaten its development. He cuts away what is not helpful for growing. A vine produces certain shoots called “sucker shoots”, which start to grow where a branch joins the stem. If they’re allowed to continue to grow, they would dissipate the life of the vine through so many branches that the vine would produce little or no fruit and would produce mainly leaves instead. Every vinedresser knows it is important to prune away those sucker shoots to ensure plentiful fruit. The gardener also cuts a lot of living branches off the vine. He trims them way back, and when he’s done, there doesn’t seem to be much left of the grapevine. All this cutting seems so drastic, so extreme, so unnecessary. But the reason the gardener does this is so that the branches reach their full potential. Even though the branches look almost dead, months later they produce a very large crop, only because the gardener did all that cutting.

This is what God does to you. He prunes you. He cuts into your life, and removes some things that you might not want removed. He takes things away from you, he changes things around for you, and sometimes, it seems so drastic, so extreme, so unnecessary. When we are being pruned, we ask him, why are you doing this to me, God?

But God cuts into your life for your good. He wants you to reach your full potential as a Christian. He wants you to produce as many fruits of faith as possible. Perhaps some of you are going through the pruning process right now. All of us experience this in our lives. While it happens, we trust that God is in control, because the gardener does know what he is doing. The goal, is that each of us becomes a fruitful branch, the third of the four branches vines we are looking at this morning. In verse 8, Jesus says, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” The fruitful Christian is one whose life is filled with good works. These good works first of all include obedience to God – doing what God wants, even when the rest of the world is doing something different. Good works include the way you treat other people – the people at home - your family, the people at work, our friends, even total strangers. When you’re around these people, and you ask yourself, how can I serve them?

How can I show the love of God to this person? How can I witness Jesus Christ to someone else? These people look for ways they can volunteer their services at church. “This is to my Father’s glory,” Jesus says, “that you bear much fruit.”

All of us would like to be fruitful branches. But how does this happen? How can you become even more fruitful in your life? The answer is by staying connected to the vine. That is the fourth and final branch we are looking at this morning, the connected branch. Look at verse 4: “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” No one can truly be a “good person” in the eyes of God unless he or she remains in Christ, and in that verse alone, “remain” is repeated 3 times. Verse 5: “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.” A person who has regular contact with Jesus Christ will produce much fruit in his life. When you remain in him, he promises you that you will bear much fruit.

There is only one way to maintain that connection with Christ, and you know that way. You’re doing it right now – by having regular contact with the word, and regular contact with the sacrament. God’s Word, and the Lord’s Supper – that’s how you remain in Christ, and how he remains in you. The story is told of a native from a remote mountain village who had the opportunity to visit a large modern city for the first time. He could not bring much home with him, and he had little money. But he was amazed at the electric lights which he saw everywhere. So he bought a sack full of electric lights bulbs and sockets with switches so he could turn them off and on. Arriving home he hung the light bulbs in front of his home and on his and his neighbor’s trees. Everyone watched him with curiosity and asked him what he was doing, but he just smiled and said, “Just wait until dark--you’ll see.” When night came he turned on the switches, but nothing happened. No one had told him about electricity. He did not know the light bulbs were useless unless connected to the source of their power.

Jesus tells you, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” He provides the electricity, the power you need in your life to produce fruits of faith. How thankful we are that he has given us his Word, and his Sacrament. Here we find that amazing message that you can sum up in three short sentences – Christ has died. Christ has risen. And Christ will come again.

So what kind of branch are you? Really, if you think about it, we are all four. We repent of those times we have been throw-away branches. We are thankful that Jesus has forgiven us. Although it is painful, we are thankful that God prunes us. We are thankful that God produces fruits of faith in our lives. And we are thankful, that Jesus remains in us, and we in him, through his Word and Sacrament. May God bless you as you ponder this picture of the vine, the branches, and the gardener. Amen.