

Resurrection Hope Bears Fruit

John 15:1-8

Last week I watched the Livestream from the hospital room as this year's Confirmation class was confirmed in the faith. Certainly not the way I anticipated I'd be watching but my wife and I watched with a special joy, since both of us had taught most of these students in class. As my first Catechism class of 7th graders, I suppose they broke me in to teaching and thankfully it doesn't seem like I broke their spirit with too much memory work.

During the service, Pastor Wordell reminded us what "confirmation" really is, a "strengthening" in the faith brought about as God's Word takes a deeper hold in our hearts. We confess the truths of the Christian faith into which we were baptized and taught, and we embrace them for ourselves, promising to remain faithful to Christ and the Christian faith we confess.

As I heard the verses these young ones selected for their confirmation verses, I couldn't help but be reminded of my own confirmation day and verse. The verse selected for me at my confirmation comes from our Gospel lesson for today, **"I am the vine and you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."** John 15:5.

That verse was chosen for me by my pastor, but those words were first chosen by Jesus for his disciples on Maundy Thursday evening, the night that served as a kind of confirmation for the disciples. They had been hearing and learning from Jesus over the past three years and now this period of intense instruction was coming to its close. Jesus was no longer going to be physically right by their side and they would have to embrace these truths for themselves.

On that final night before Jesus would die the next day, Jesus prepared a night full of final instructions and blessings to give them the strengthening they would need for everything they were about to face even later that evening. He demonstrated the true heart of a servant, as he, the master, washed the feet of his servants. He comforted them with the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide them in the truth, and bless them after he was gone. He gave to them his Holy Supper, his body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sin.

But with these gospel promises, he also made them face reality. Just as Pastor Wordell warned that one third or even half of all confirmands fall away, Jesus was under no naive illusions about what the disciples were going to do that night. He warned them bluntly. **"One of you will betray me"** (John 26:21). And they all looked around dumbfounded like Jesus didn't know what he was talking about. **"Surely not I, Lord?"**

Later, Jesus told them, **"This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."** (Matthew 26:31,32). Again, they can't believe it. Peter doubles down, **"Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."** (33). Jesus takes Peter to task. [You know, Peter, it's funny you should say that, **"This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."** (34) And Peter triple-dog-downs, **"Even if I have to die with you, 'I will never disown you.' And all the other disciples said the same."** (35). They had all emphatically made their confirmation promises, soon to be emphatically broken.

Have you made those promises like Peter? "I will never!" Then doubled down on it, "Never ever!" Have you had the gumption to triple-dog-down on it, "Never, no not ever, even if

I have to die!” and then crumbled, finding yourself in the herd of disciples running away from Jesus, or next to Peter weeping bitterly at the sound of the rooster reminding you how you miserably failed three times in a matter of hours.

Jesus wasn't there for fake sinners; he was there for real ones. And after he warns them about all that lies ahead, he beckons to the disciples, **“Come now; let us leave.” (John 14:31)**. But actually he's not finished yet, because before they leave for the garden, Jesus goes on for three more chapters, trying to strengthen and bolster them with both Word and prayer. The first picture he teaches them couldn't be more fitting for what they were about to face--the metaphor of the Vine and the Branches.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.” (or the “vinedresser” we might better understand. He's calling to mind not just a little hobby garden in the backyard, but a vineyard where grapes are grown to make wine. When he calls himself the “true vine”, he's contrasting himself with the way the Old Testament, especially the prophet Isaiah, described Israel as an unfruitful vineyard.

This is Isaiah's song about the Lord and his vineyard, **“My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit...The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. (Isaiah 5:1,2,7)**

So we see Jesus stand in the place of Israel, the fruitful for the unfruitful, the true vine in place of the bad vineyard. And his Father the vinedresser works on pruning the branches, his people.

Now as long as I've heard this passage, I think I've had a misconception about which part really is the vine and which are the branches in this whole grapevine metaphor. See, when I hear the word vine, I tend to think of a flexible green rope-vine that hangs from the trees in the jungle, the kind that Tarzan swings from. When I hear branches, I think of the wood part, the sticks, and then the vines hang from the branches. But that gets the metaphor all backwards, because when you're talking about a grapevine and branches, the vine is actually the inner wood trunk part and the branches are actually the greener more flexible part that grows out from the vine and produce the grapes.

So now that we've got the picture straight, this section breaks down into a cycle of three things, 1) the basic truth, 2) a warning, 3) and a call to remain paired with a promise.

1) Here's the basic truth of the metaphor- Jesus is the vine, his Father the vinedresser, and you are the branches. Jesus is the life-source and from him comes the nutrition for the branches to produce fruit. The Father, the vinedresser, tends and prunes these branches to be even more fruitful. He gets ride of the extra tangle and he shapes the branches to produce a crop. The Jesus adds, **“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”** (John 15:3). There's actually a pun there because the word for “clean” sound really close to the word for “prunes”. So it's like Jesus is saying, “You've already been pruned by the Father.

2) Here's the warning- the Father cuts off every branch that bears no fruit. There's no room for dead weight. No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine. If you do not remain in the vine, fed and nourished by the life-giving word, you cannot bear fruit, and those branches are cut off, thrown in the fire and burned. “Without me,” Jesus says, “You're dead and fit for the fire.”

3) With the basic truth and the warning in place, then Jesus calls the branches to remain in him! Seven times in these eight verses Jesus repeats that word “remain”. He does it so many times that the disciples and us get the point no matter how dense and distracted we sometimes are. With this gospel call to remain in the vine, Jesus gives an amazing set of promises. **“Remain in me and I will remain in you!”** and even more than that, **“The one who remains in me will bear fruit.** In our translation, it comes off sounding conditional. “If you remain, you will bear fruit.” But it’s really not so much a conditional as it is a promise. The one who remains in me will bear fruit! And Jesus adds to that promise as well. **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”** The Father will surely take care of every branch that remains in the vine and give them exactly what is good and best for them. The pruning may not always feel pleasant, but the Father only does what is beneficial for the branches.

As you remain in the vine and you produce fruit just as Jesus promised, the fruit you bear is what makes the vine and the vinedresser look good. **“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:8).** That is the privilege we have as branches, to make God look good by the fruit he produces in us and through us. Our fruit demonstrates our connection to the vine.

So how did those disciples initially fare that night after their confirmation promises. Not good! Judas betrayed Jesus and led the soldiers to him. Then later he cut himself off from the vine as he took his own life in unbelief and despair. When the soldiers showed up, John ran away so fast he ran right out of his clothes. The rest scattered and fell away. And Peter? What of Peter? He went on to deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed, just as Jesus warned. Been there? Yeah, me too!

But even **“if we are faithless, God remains faithful.”** (2 Timothy 2:13) The Father went to work pruning his branches to make them fruitful. John was back at the crucifixion and Jesus entrusted his mother to his care. Jesus renewed the faith of Thomas in truth of the resurrection. Once Jesus rose from the dead and went before them into Galilee, just as he said, there he restored Peter and triple-dog charged him, “Feed my lambs.” And all the remaining disciples he made witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Those once fearful scattering disciples glorified their Father the gardener with their lives, as God used their work and witness to give birth to the New Testament Church. They showed themselves to be disciples of Christ, bearing fruit that will last to eternal life. So it was said about them, **“Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” Acts 5:42).**

So what does this all mean for you? You are connected to the same Vine. You have the same Father who prunes you and makes you fruitful. You cannot bear fruit apart from the vine. Sometimes you will feel the need to try, just like those disciples and you will fail miserably. But the Vine calls you back to himself and restores you with his promise. “Remain in me, and I will remain in you, and you will bear much fruit.” Amen.