

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Abide in me as I abide in you." - John 15:4

Most of us don't spend much time pondering and studying vines and their branches, or even trees and their branches. We're too busy looking at the whole plant to see something as insignificant as how a branch abides in the vine. Yet, Jesus says that if we would look at the branch we would see the mystery of our life with Him. We would see what it means to abide in Him and through abiding to bear fruit.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus uses images of vines and branches, wheat and tares, fields ready for harvest, fig trees and vineyards. Part of the reason for this is that these images make sense to a people whose world was more rural than urban, but there's more to it than just "context."

The use of images of vines and branches, wheat and tares, fields ready for harvest, vineyards and fig trees isn't just a means to relate the truths of the Gospel to everyday life in First Century Palestine - if that were case they wouldn't speak to us who live in Twenty-first Century Muskegon. No, the deeper reason is that these are organic things, living things, and God is, as Jesus says, *"the God of living,"* and as Jesus says of Himself, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."*

Think back to the Genesis. Before God spoke and created all things, was there life? Yes, there was God. Think again to Exodus, and Moses' conversation with the burning bush. Moses asks the Lord for His name, and the Lord says, *"I am who I am."* The name of the Lord is really of declaration of being, "I am." God is, and everything else that lives has life only because God is, and gives it life.

The organic images found throughout Scripture are rooted in the truth that God is life, from God comes life, and God is the god of the living. You can't really express that truth by talking about a car or a machine, but a vine and it's branches? Yes.

Because God is life, and life comes from God, we can begin to unravel the mystery of abiding in Jesus when we look at how a branch abides in a vine. When you look closely at a branch and a vine the first thing you'll notice is that it's kind of hard to tell where the one actually ends and the other begins, because the branch grows from the vine.

Indeed the branch is completely dependent on the vine, and this is what Jesus wants us to see when He says in John 15:5, "*apart from me you can do nothing.*" The relationship of branch to the vine is both dependent, and receptive.

It is the sap from the vine that nourishes the branches. The vine gives and the branch receives life. And because it receives it is capable of bearing fruit. But cut the branch off and it dries out and dies, because on its own it can **do** nothing.

This, Jesus says is our relationship with Him. "*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.*"

Which raises the natural question, how do I abide in Jesus? If I need to abide in Him to have life and bear fruit how do I **do** that. That's the natural question that arises in our hearts, but it's missing something. Something important.

We hear Jesus say, "*Abide in me as I abide in you,*" and we think that that's a command we need to fulfill, because our minds and hearts latch onto, "*Abide in me,*" because it sounds like something we are capable of doing. What we miss and overlook to our peril, is the rest of what Jesus says, "*as I abide in you.*" Notice that "*as I,*" In other words, "*Abide in me as I already abide in you.*"

This is what we miss, our life with Christ does not begin with us, any more than the vine begins in the branch. No, the branch begins in the vine. Our life with Christ, your life with Christ, begins not with you and what you do, but with Him and what He has done. He created you, He provides for you, and He took on flesh to live, suffer, die, and rise for you before ever you even knew Him. Through the Holy Spirit He called you as His, and the vine-grower - the Father - grafted you into the vine in Your baptism and united you to Jesus, and now the Holy Spirit nourishes you and all the branches who are united to the True Vine, to Jesus.

Abiding doesn't start with you. It starts with Him. It starts with Him and His Word. Just as in the beginning there was God and God spoke things into existence, so too in the beginning of your life with Christ God speaks and calls you as His in the water and word of your baptism. There He grafts you into the vine, the True Vine, Jesus Christ. And just as His Word gave you life in Christ by declaring you to be justified in His sight, His Word creates in you faith to believe and to trust that Jesus' suffering and death on the cross and His resurrection were for you, that for Jesus' sake your sin is forgiven, and in Him you receive righteousness, holiness, and life eternal.

His Word is the sap that gives you, the branch, life. Not life in just our ordinary human biological sense, but life in the sense that Scripture speaks, the life of God, life with God, life through God. That life comes to you through faith in the Son of God.

Faith is not a feeling you and I generate by the power of our hearts. No, faith is a gift from God, and it is a living and active thing, this God-given faith. And the thing about faith is it always has an object towards which it is directed, for which it grabs, and to which it wants to cling. The object for which this God-given faith, this saving faith, grabs for, and wants to cling to? It's Jesus Christ, crucified.

This faith, this living and active faith, given by God is what brings about our abiding in Jesus when it reaches out and grabs a hold of Jesus. Just as a branch when grafted into a vine grows together with the vine that gives it life, so faith grabs a hold of Jesus and we grow in union with Jesus who is our life, who is the true vine.

But how do I get this faith? Through the Word and the Sacraments. Just as water and nutrients flow from the vine into the branch, and nourish it, so faith in Christ comes through His Word and His Sacraments. Because these tell you and show you what Jesus has done for you. They tell you and show you the favor He has for you, even while you were a sinner, even as you are a sinner, to live, suffer, die, and rise so you may have life with Him, in Him, and through Him.

Everything in the Church is made to give, create, and sustain this faith in Christ. The Law reminds you why you need Jesus, crucified; the Gospel reminds you He has been crucified for you; and the Sacraments prove to you His love for you even as they give Him to you in water and word, and bread and wine. Through these means Jesus comes

and abides in you, through these means faith in Jesus is nourished and strengthened so that you abide in Him as He abides in you.

Grafted into Christ by baptism, day by day, week by week, as you read His Word, and hear His Law and His Gospel preached, and receive His body and blood, and confess your sins and hear His absolution, Jesus strengthens the bonds of faith uniting you to Him and Him to you, and He gives you life by giving you His very self.

And that is all it takes to bear fruit. Just as a branch that abides in the vine and receives life from it produces grapes, so too faith produces good works in you when you abide in Jesus as He abides in you.

Notice this, carefully, good works are the fruit of faith in Christ. The branch cannot produce anything unless it abides in the vine. It has to receive the sap before it can flower and fruit. Of itself it does nothing, but with the vine it does everything. So it is with Christians.

Our natural, fallen way of looking at life with God is to think that it's based on what we can do. That gets us in trouble because it leaves us worrying and doubting first that we've done the right things for God, and second that we've done enough well enough to earn His favor.

Jesus would have us look at the vine and its branches. The branch does not produce anything on its own, and the vine is not concerned with how much or how perfect the fruit is, is it? No, what matters is this, and this alone - that the branch abides in the vine as the vine abides in it, so that the branch can receive life from the vine, and the branch will consequently bear fruit. If the fruit is small it doesn't matter to the vine, if the fruit isn't perfect it doesn't matter to the vine. What matters is simply that the branch abides in the vine as the vine abides in the branch.

That is how it is with Jesus and you. Jesus is not worried about the amount of fruit. He's not worried about whether it is perfect. He's worried only about giving you life because He knows that when you have life in Him, with Him, and through Him you will bear fruit.

That fruit is found in your vocations. Because, you see, the vine doesn't need the fruit does it? No. The birds need the fruit. The people who drink wine and eat the grapes need

the fruit. So it is with Jesus, and you, and your neighbors. Jesus doesn't need your good works, He causes them. Just as His word gives you life and faith to trust that He has done the whole work of your salvation, so now His Word bears fruit as He points you to your neighbor.

Are you a husband? Love your wife as you love yourself and give yourself for her. Are you a wife? Receive his sacrifice and cherish him for it. Are you a father? Are you a mother? Care for you children, and teach them about Jesus. Are you a child? Do not needlessly anger your parents, but pray for them to be better parents, and care for them as they age. Are you a grandparent, support your children, love your grandchildren, and share Jesus with both of them, and show them how to live and to die with faith in Christ. Are you an employer, pay your employees well and serve them as Christ has served you. Are you an employee? Work as you would for Christ. Are you a teacher? Guide your students to the truth and to knowledge. A doctor, a nurse? Heal your patients and give them life and dignity even as they face sickness and death. Are you a citizen? Then remember that it is God who ordains governments and nations to provide order and peace, and exercise your rights and your duties to that end, because order and peace give life to your neighbors.

Are you a Christian? Then bear with your neighbors both Christian and non-Christian in love as Christ bears with you. Give yourself up for them, forgiving them as Christ gave Himself up for you and forgave you.

How you do that can be as simple as dishes washed and put away, a meal cooked, a diaper changed. It's as simple as prayers taught and said together, a story from Scripture read, an "I'm sorry," an "I forgive you," and an "I love you."

And in all of this abide in Jesus as He abides in you. receive His Word and His Sacraments, and with them faith. Faith which clings to Christ; faith which trusts Jesus that His life is enough, His death is enough, His resurrection is enough and they are for you. Abide in Him as He abides in you, for He is the True Vine and you are His branches. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen!