

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Trinity 2, June 30, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 411:1-5, 414:1-3, 296, 342, 544:6.

Lessons: Isaiah 5:1-7, James 3:2-17, Mark 4:3-20.

Text: John 15:1-8

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

(This sermon was originally preached with four props. The first three items were a totally dead piece of grapevine, a freshly cut grapevine with some leaves on it, and a living, potted plant. They were displayed to the congregation as they were mentioned, and laid on the floor in the front of the church. The fourth prop was a fake, artificial grapevine, not displayed until later in the sermon.)

I think you know that there are good grapevines that give lots of good fruit, and that there are also bad vines that do not bring forth any good fruit, or not even any fruit at all. When you drive past my house look at the wild grapevines growing on the fence behind it. You will see vines that do not bear any good fruit. These vines grow wild and have spread several blocks, growing up on the fence. For more than 30 years I have looked for grapes from that grapevine, but have never seen or found any grapes that are good for eating. The closest that grapevine has come to bearing fruit is a few tiny clusters of very tiny grapes. But if you want to pick some good grapes, you could walk along that fence that leads to the bridge from North Mankato to Mankato – the one they call the “North Star Bridge”. The state planted good vines along that fence down near the new bridge and someone picks the big clusters of large, sweet grapes as soon as they are ripe. These are good vines, and they have been well-cared for.

Jesus talks to us about vines and fruit today. It is easy to imagine him walking over to a grapevine and using that as the illustration for his sermon.

GOOD FRUIT COMES FROM GOOD VINES

- 1. Jesus is the vine and you, the Child of God, are branches of that vine.**
- 2. When you remain attached to the vine, you too, will be fruitful.**
- 3. When you are detached from the vine, the result is death.**

Imagine a new eating plan. You can start it today. Many of you will be going home to a good meal, and perhaps because it is Sunday, a little better today than some other days. You can expect to have a full stomach by the time you leave the dinner table today. There may even be some things that you find a bit boring to eat on the table. But you will probably leave the dinner table today feeling satisfied, as if you have enough food in you to last a while. And that’s the new eating plan. You won’t eat again until next Sunday dinner. Oh, you can have a few bits of food during the week until next Sunday. But no real meal until NEXT Sunday dinner.

Are you thinking that you won’t like that eating plan? Are you thinking that you need to eat every day – and several times each day? Are you thinking that I am a little crazy to suggest this kind of eating plan?

OK, I am talking about physical food – what you need to keep your body going for the next week – food for your earthly life. You have to eat regularly. You need good, nourishing food. You need a certain amount of food so that you don’t become malnourished, or, like some in the world today, so that you don’t starve, and die a horrible death because you don’t get enough food or get the right food.

So let’s draw a parallel to that example of what you are thinking is a really bad eating plan.

Let's talk about spiritual food. Food for the soul. Food to feed your eternal life. You could probably think that today, right now, you are getting a pretty good meal of food for your soul. And I think you are. You are hearing the Word of God, you are hearing about Jesus, and he said "***I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***" (John 14:6 NIV)

You have sung to the glory of God. A few minutes ago you heard that your sins are forgiven because of what Jesus did for you. You heard those words right after you confessed your sinfulness, to your God, and publicly, among fellow sinners. Even the people standing next to you heard you say that you are sorry you have sinned. And they forgive you for the sins you have committed against them. And in The Lord's Supper we have the opportunity to receive the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, together with the bread and the wine. In that sacrament you have further assurance that your sins are forgiven, that Jesus died for you for the remission, the forgiveness of your sins.

Pretty good banquet, huh? How long do you think it will feed your soul before you need nourishment again? Well, how about that Sunday dinner you are about to have? Even if it were a feast, and you ate all you could until you couldn't eat any more, I can guarantee that you would be hungry again tomorrow. In fact, your body would think that you will be hungry in about 4 or 5 or 6 hours.

But when are you planning for your next spiritual meal? When are you planning to feed your soul again? What are you planning for soul food to eat tomorrow, and the rest of the week? Are you thinking "well, next weekend there are some things I want to do and I really don't want to come to church when I can do something more exciting"? Maybe in two weeks I'll get some food for my soul again. Or are you thinking: Tonight is a great time to get back into that family devotion or Bible reading plan I kind of slipped out of. Tonight is a perfect time to feed myself and my family again with God's Word.

Can I offer you an important menu plan from Jesus Christ? You heard him say to you: 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. "***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. 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. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.***"

Let's use some illustrations now that I think are very relevant to our sermon text. Look at this dead branch from a grapevine. I can be pretty sure that it won't bear any grapes. I cut it off the fence behind my house and I know it has been dead for at least a few years. In fact, I had to cut it out of the fence. No hope of any fruit here.

OK. Look at this. I just cut this off the grapevine this morning. See the leaves? Maybe there was some hope of grapes from this branch, and I can assure you that these grapevines grow like crazy. I have to trim them every couple of months in a good growing season, or they would even cover that big evergreen tree – the one that is about 40 feet high in my backyard – in just a few years. But will it bear much fruit? Will it bear any fruit? Nope. Not unless I try to graft it back on to a good grapevine with good roots, and I'm not very good at that. I don't know the first thing about growing grapevines and grafting them back. So don't expect any grapes from this branch. About all I can do is throw it on my compost pile at home.

Now look at this. OK, it isn't really a grapevine. But I think you can see that it is healthy, and growing, and with a little bit of care, it can bring forth many (flowers or tomatoes or whatever it is). If you look closely, you can even see some buds on it. But if I don't water this it will die. If I don't give it some fertilizer – some plant food – it won't be very healthy and may even die. It needs nourishment – water at the very least – and not just once a week! I've tried that. I've been gone for a week and my potted plants got no water and they were pretty dead a week later.

What did Jesus say? "***Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.***" (Hold up the cut leafing vine) "***Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 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.***"

And just as importantly, he said ***"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."*** Yes, YOU are clean because of the words and work of Jesus Christ. You are cleansed from your sins – you publicly repented of them this morning. And the Words of Jesus assuring you of the forgiveness of sins were spoken to assure you that you are clean. As God's freshly washed and cleaned children, you don't want to go out and play in the mud of sin. You don't want to let those wicked thoughts become words and actions.

We DO have words of warning. Jesus told us that his father cuts off every branch in him that bears no fruit. What do you suppose that means? Doesn't it mean that if you don't eat any spiritual food you will die? That is an eternal death that Jesus is talking about. That is the eternal death of everyone who does not believe in Jesus Christ as his or her savior from sin.

And Jesus gets even more harsh and sharp with his words: ***"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."***

This old stick has no usefulness as a grapevine any more. I'll probably throw it on my firewood pile at home and burn it up one of these days. It will never bear grapes. Jesus gives some harsh words of warning here: If you don't remain in him, you are just like this ugly old branch that will get burned up. Doesn't that remind you of the pictures from Revelation where God tells us that the devil, and false prophets and – from the book of Revelation (Rev 21:8 NIV) ***"the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars--their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur."*** The words of the King James translation tell us that all such will be ***"cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone."*** (Rev 19:20 KJV) And they ***"shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever."*** (Rev 20:10 KJV) We also read (Rev 20:15 NIV) ***"If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."*** That kind of warning from the Law of God is scary, isn't it.

But Jesus isn't just condemning. He is encouraging to those who receive their spiritual nourishment from him: ***"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."*** Has God ever denied you any spiritual blessings you have asked for in prayer? But what does our sinful flesh pray for? Isn't it earthly things? Ask God for spiritual blessings and you will receive them. Search the scriptures and you will be rewarded. Eat and drink and be nourished every day by God's Holy Words and you will live the more abundant life, not just eternally, but also here on earth.

But we don't have a perfect life on earth. Listen to why even the most devout believers have what appear to be difficulties. Jesus said that his Father ***"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."*** Do you know what pruning is? It is trimming, it is cutting off what is useless, it is shaping a vine to make it more fruitful. In one good example, every year I cut out the ends of branches from that grapevine that have died. I even try to bend some branches to fill in some empty spaces on the fence and I cut off those branches that are growing in the wrong places. My clumsy efforts at pruning don't result in any more fruit. But God's work does. He knows what he is doing. After all, he made us, he created us, and he knows our inmost thoughts. So this pruning sometimes hurts. It could be compared to the crosses that we have to bear for Jesus sake. So things don't always go the way WE want them to go on earth. But rest assured that God wants to do the pruning in our lives. As a result, we will be more fruitful.

Just one more thing. Be sure to follow the real thing. (Pull out the fake grapevine that looks good.) Jesus says ***"I am the true vine."*** Watch out for imitations. The fake thing looks good, even beautiful, but it bears no fruit. Don't turn to anyone else for your spiritual food. Turn to your source, the right source, the good source, the true vine!

You have his promise: ***"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."***

Dear heavenly Father, may we be living branches of the true vine, pruned and fed by you, so that you may be glorified! Amen.