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Easter 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Promise of Fruit”

Text: John 15:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Holy Gospel for today makes it abundantly clear – God wants us to produce what He calls fruit. The word is mentioned six times in these verses, with Jesus talking not just about fruit, but His desire for *more* fruit, and much fruit. . . . And our natural reaction to hearing words like this is to take stock of our lives, and ask ourselves, “*Have I produced fruit? Have I produced any fruit? Have I produced enough fruit?*” And with such self-investigation, one of two things happens: either we despair, because the answer to those questions is no; or, we become puffed-up and filled with pride, because we are quite satisfied with ourselves and our efforts and our achievements, thank you very much!

But neither of those things is what God wants. Jesus did not speak these words to His disciples to make them feel good or bad at their own efforts, or to prod them on to do more. Jesus spoke these words to His disciples as they were on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane, mere hours before He was arrested; mere hours before the Shepherd was struck and the sheep were scattered; mere hours before they would see their friend and leader lifted up on the cross. . . . And so Jesus did not use these precious few hours to prod His disciples on, and burden them with commands and expectations! They would be burdened enough over the next few hours – burdened with fear and shame and guilt and sadness, and it is not Jesus’ intention here to add to that. . . . No, these words of Jesus are meant to be words of *comfort*, words of *promise*, words of *encouragement*. To point us not into examining ourselves, but to looking to God for all that we need. **For abiding in Him, we will bear fruit. Apart from Him, we can do nothing.**

And notice: you will bear fruit. That’s not a statement telling you what to do – that’s a statement of fact, of reality, of promise. This is what will happen by abiding in Christ. It does not say that you will do fruit-bearing activities, and it does not command you to go and produce fruit. It simply says that you will. Because that is who you are. Because apple trees grow apples, and grape vines grow grapes – not because they are commanded to, but because that is what they are. So you too will produce fruit, the fruit of Christ, because abiding in Him and He in you, that is who you are.

And so listen again to what Jesus says here – about Himself, and about our Heavenly Father, and the *care* that is given to His branches. ***“I am the true vine; you are the branches.”*** And although it sounds obvious to say, it is important nonetheless – as Christians, first of all, we are *connected* to Christ. We receive from Him all that is necessary to live. From His roots and stem we receive forgiveness, life, health, Spirit, faith, strength, and all that we need. And He *wants* it that way. He does not want to be a God and Saviour who is far away, watching all that is going on down here on earth from His perch in Heaven. No, He came to be with us. He came to give us life. He came to take us and connect us to Himself so that His life would be our life. And so in Holy Baptism He connects us to Himself and gives us the water of life. And connected to Him He feeds and nourishes us with His body and blood in Holy Communion. He strengthens us with His Word. He connects us to Himself and He’s not going to leave us on our own. He is the true vine, the good vine, the faithful vine. And we are not just branches – we are His branches.

But now also listen to what Jesus says about the care of our Heavenly Father, the vinedresser. We heard, ***“Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”*** Now, that’s an unfortunate translation. It’s probably the way you’re used to hearing these verses, but it makes God sound pretty ruthless, doesn’t it?! Produce fruit, or else! . . . But there’s actually a more natural way of translating the first part of this verse – and one that makes a bit more sense in the context here. And it is this: ***“Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit He lifts up . . .”*** For consider, if you have a tomato plant that you want to produce a lot of tomatoes, what do you do? Do you let it and its branches flop around on the ground, and if you don’t see any tomatoes, cut off the branch? Or do you *lift up* the branches and tie them up? Don’t you lift them up so they don’t get mud on them, and so they can be in the sun, and have a better chance of producing the fruit that you want? . . . That is what your Heavenly Father is doing. Lifting you up out of the muck and mire of your sins. Lifting you up into the brightness of His Son. Lifting you up from all in this world that can so easily drag you down. That is what your Heavenly Father is doing – not looking for whom He can chop off, but caring, and lifting, and loving. And He does so through those around you, whom He has placed around you to care for you. Parents, friends, and neighbors; pastor and church; police and government; teachers, workers, Good Samaritans. All these, Luther said, are *“masks of God.”* God using others to care for you, and using you to care for others. To lift you up, to support you, so that you will bear fruit.

But the second half of that verse is equally true as well – those God loves He also prunes. Not as punishment, but as part of His caring. He doesn’t leave us to grow wild, but cuts

us back, to strengthen us, that we produce more fruit, much fruit. And so He disciplines us, places crosses upon us, perhaps even to the point where we think we have nothing left! But the vinedresser, the Father, knows what He's doing. And after the times of pruning there is growth, and fruit. The vine, the stem, feeds the branch and causes it to grow again. And so after cutting away our sinful habits, our wrong priorities, our misplaced values, our wild growth – we are born again, resurrected, given new life. And not just once or twice, but over and over again. Forgiveness follows repentance. Healing follows suffering. Growth follows hardship. And we bear fruit, *more* fruit, much fruit. Not of our own doing, but because of the care of our Father; because of the life of the true vine, to which we are connected.

And it may surprise you what that fruit is, and what it looks like. Producing fruit does not necessarily mean success as it is measured by worldly standards. It may produce results like that, but that's up to God! But if we judge who is in Jesus and His Word and bearing much fruit solely by worldly standards then it must be the Mormons who are the best because right now they're the fastest growing religious body in our country! But the Mormons are not even a Christian Church. . . . That's not what Jesus here means by prospering, or bearing fruit, or growing. If God chooses to make that happen, then it will. But whether or not God chooses to make that happen is not a measure of the true confession of faith, of abiding in Jesus, and He and His Word abiding in us. It may happen, but it also may not.

Instead, what Jesus means here by bearing fruit is that which we see much more often. It means Christians and churches producing **the fruits of faith**, which in the world's eyes looks very unimpressive – but which are of great value in God's eyes. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Speaking a word of encouragement and forgiveness when someone is down. Not repaying evil with evil, but evil with good. Standing up for someone who cannot stand up for themselves. Welcoming the outcast and the unloved. Visiting the lonely. Helping those in need. ***“Opening your mouth,”*** as Philip did with the Ethiopian, to tell them of your Saviour when the opportunity arises. Lifting up others in prayer. . . . None of those things sound or look very spectacular or impressive, yet they are the fruits of faith that are well-pleasing to God. The Epistle reading spoke about keeping the commandments of God, but the commandments are much more than simply *“thou shalt nots!”* They speak also of the things we are to do, the positive things, the things of faith and love, the fruits of faith. And God is producing those fruits in you, working in you, working through you. Because He is the true vine, and the perfect vinedresser, and He has cleansed you and made you His own.

And Jesus speaks of this cleansing in connection with fruit bearing, for it is important. You cannot, in fact, separate the two. ***“You are already clean,”*** Jesus says, ***“because of the word I have spoken to you.”*** You are already clean, and ready to bear fruit. You are clean because Christ’s word of forgiveness has taken away all your sin and guilt. You are clean because Christ word of adoption has made you His own. You are clean because Christ’s words of promise have given you all that you need. And Christ’s word can do all of that, because behind His Word, as we remember especially this season, is the power of His resurrection.

+ And so we know that **His forgiveness** is sure *because of His resurrection* – our sins that caused His death on the cross could not keep Him in the grave.

+ And we know that **His Word** is true *because of His resurrection* – He said that He would rise, and He did! What else can He therefore not do?

+ And we know that **His promises** are sure *because of His resurrection* – because risen from the dead, He lives to keep all of His promises.

And so He is the true vine, the living vine, the faithful vine *that can never die again*. And abiding in Him and His Word, His life becomes our life. And as His life is eternal, so therefore is ours! . . . And as branches on that vine, you will produce the fruit that God desires. For Christ is working in you that which is well-pleasing, and which glorifies His Father. Christ is working in you, but not with your strength, or your wisdom, or your abilities – but with His strength, and His Word, and His Spirit. Christ is working in you and producing fruit, *more* fruit, much fruit . . . but not simply by commanding you to do so from the outside in – but rather by changing you from the inside out.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.