

10 May 2009
The Fifth Sunday of Easter

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Blade for Life”

Text: John 15:1-8 (Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:1-11)

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

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia!

Jesus told us today: ***“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”***

What’s the difference between “taking away” branches or cutting them off, and pruning? Jesus mentions both in the verses I just read. But how can you tell one from the other? Both involve a plant, both involve branches, and both involve cutting. But there are two entirely different results.

Well perhaps, we might say, the difference is one of purpose, or sincerity - what it is that you *intend* to do. But that doesn’t work. Because there are times when I sincerely intend to prune a plant, and make it better and stronger, but what I wind up doing is cutting off the branches and killing it. And the opposite is true as well. There are times when I sincerely try to take away a plant and cut off its branches, only to have it come back and grow stronger than ever! Perhaps the same kinds of things have happened to you. So intent, or sincerity, isn’t the key.

No, what makes the difference between taking away and pruning *is the eye and skill of the one with the blade*. Branches that I think are dead and fruitless and should be cut off, the skillful eye of the pruner will leave. And then I’ve watched knowledgeable pruners at work, and I see all the stuff they’re cutting off and I think their killing the plant! But in a little while, their expertise - and my ignorance! - begins to show, as the plant roars back to life, better and more fruitful than ever.

That’s why it’s good to have people who know what their doing. And that’s why it’s good that Jesus said to us today that when it comes to our lives as Christians, we have someone who knows what He’s doing. Someone who knows which branches are dead and which are not. Someone who knows how to prune and make us more fruitful. Someone not just with good intentions and sincerity, but the One who created us, and so knows how to best care for us. ***“I am the true vine,”*** Jesus said,

“and my Father is the vinedresser.” So, dear Christians, you’re in good hands!

But we need to consider that a bit today, because knowing that and believing that is a matter of faith. Of faith believing and trusting that when the blade is coming down on you, and it feels as if you’re being cut off, or punished, or thrown away, that your Father is - in goodness and love - doing what needs to be done not to hurt you, but to help you. His careful eye and skillful hand pruning you, that you bear much fruit, more fruit. Now, to our untrained and disbelieving eyes, it may not look or seem that way. We feel what’s happening to ourselves and see what’s happening to others, and think the worst. But while our minds may think the worst, faith believes the best, and trusts the merciful and compassionate hand of our Father in heaven. His hand which connects us to Jesus and keeps us in Jesus.

That work began for you and me at the font. For the water of Holy Baptism is where we were connected to Jesus and given life. We were cleansed and forgiven and given the new life of faith in the Spirit. Some of us came to those waters as infants, some as children, some as adults. No matter. It was the same hand of God taking us and joining us to Jesus, that we grow in Him and He in us. He the vine and we the branches. We heard about a baptism today: the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, and how God worked to bring Him to the water of Baptism and life. It sounded all simple and easy, but it probably wasn’t always so. For what had the eunuch been through? What hardships and struggles? What brought him to this point? . . . Was his an extraordinary story? Yes, in some ways. But no more extraordinary than yours, and how your Father has worked in your life, through His Word, through His servants, through the water, to connect you to, and keep you in, Jesus. It’s not always easy, but in the end, we too will go our way rejoicing.

But the work of the font doesn’t end at the font. We are not begun in this Christian life and then left on our own, as some false prophets would teach - left to make the best of it; left to reach our potential; left to see if we will make it to the finish line of heaven, where God is waiting for us. No, the hand of our Father-Vinedresser continues to work, in your life, in your heart, to keep you in the life He has given you. **To keep you in Christ.** Because it is a life we often wander from, isn’t it? Drinking in the wisdom of the world instead of the wisdom of Christ and His Word. Growing into the ways of the world instead of the ways of Christ. Branching off in directions contrary to Christ and His life. Wild branches, we might call ourselves. Uncontrolled branches, maybe. Branches that the blade ought come down on, no?

But which blade? To give up on us, cut us off, and take us away? Or to lovingly prune us, with a skillful eye, at just the right time, and in just the right way, that we grow right again? And how do we know? How can we tell the difference?

Well we can know by looking to the cross. For there we see that Jesus became for

us the one cut off in our place. By taking all our sin, all our wildness, all our uncontrollability, all our rebellion, all our unfruitfulness upon Himself, and receiving the death blade of the Father in our place. What we deserve, He received. **My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?** Cut off. **I thirst.** Cut off from the life and juice of the vine. **It is finished.** Dead. Cast away. Ready to be burned.

Except He is not burned, but this tree roars back to life in resurrection! The fires of hell cannot consume Him - He is victorious over them. The bonds of the grave cannot keep Him - He bursts them. The penalty of sin cannot enslave Him - it has been paid in full. And so the Tree of Life lives again! The true and new Tree of Life, once barred because of sin, is available again! And gives life to you. For He is the vine, the tree, you have been grafted onto. And so His life is now your life. A new life, a true life, that is yours to live now, and to live forever.

And so the death and resurrection of Jesus shows us that the blade we often feel in our lives is no blade of death, but a blade of life. For those connected to Christ, death is done and life now reigns. Our merciful and compassionate Father prunes us only to discipline us, to correct us, to get us to grow straight, to get us to produce more and better fruit - to keep us in Christ. And so He is working. He calls us back to the font in repentance, calling us to Christ, to wash again in His absolution - His forgiveness - and be once again raised with Christ to a new life. He calls us back to the altar, to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ - the fruits of the cross, the fruits of the new Tree of Life - to be nourished and fed, forgiven, and raised with Christ to a new life. He calls us back to the Gospel, that we abide in Christ and Christ in us, and so produce much fruit. The fruits of faith. Not our own fruits, but the fruits of Christ and His Spirit, which come from Him and flow through us branches.

Apart from Him, we can do nothing, because apart from Him, we are dead. Dead, lifeless, dried up branches. But abiding in Him, we not only have life, but His *promise*: that we will produce fruit. For notice that there were no commands to produce fruit in these verses - only the *promise* of fruit. The *command* is to abide in Christ. As we do so, He will work in you and through you, producing the fruit of lips that confess His name, and the fruit of love that loves as He has loved us. And so the key is not anything in us or what we do, but in Christ and what He has done. And connected to Him, His love becomes our love, His compassion our compassion, His life our life. A life to live, a life to lay down for others, a life that will never end.

And if you feel like that pruning blade has been at work on you overtime, well **thanks be to God** for such attention, love, and care. Thanks be to God that your life and love matter that much to Him. Thanks be to God that *Christ is risen!* [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] And that His life now lives in you.

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 faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.