



Easter 5-May 2, 2021

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Acts 8:26-40 and John 15: 1-8

"Fruit From the Vine"

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Dear friends, Grace, and peace to you from God our Father and from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen*

After Moses had been called by the Lord from the burning bush to lead his chosen people, the Israelites, and since Moses didn't see the Lord in the bush, he asked the Lord who it was who was sending him. The Lord responded, "I AM WHO I AM". Later when the Lord gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, the first words on the tablets of stone were "I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD, you shall have no other gods before me." Since Jesus is one with his father, Jesus continues with these "I AM" statements to further identify who he is and to remind us of who we are.

We just heard one of these "I AM" statements last week when Jesus said, I am the Good Shepherd. Jesus clearly identified that there is one good shepherd, and we are his sheep of his pasture. Jesus also said that I AM the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. In this I AM statement, Jesus makes clear that there is nothing you can offer to Jesus to gain entrance into his kingdom. No one comes to the Father except through his choosing. Jesus also said, I AM the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. Jesus gives the assurance of eternal life by faith alone. This does not mean do your best and Jesus will do the rest. It means that Jesus has done it all for you. Jesus also said, "I AM the door, if anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." Once you have been claimed as a child of God, you will be saved. There is nothing in this promise about improving your odds of salvation after you have done your part. Jesus also said, "I AM the bread of life, he who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst again. Jesus said, "I AM the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of the world." Jesus does not share being the subject of any of these statements with anyone else. As the Lord told Moses, tell the people, I AM WHO I AM. I AM the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods but ME.

In the gospel for today from John, Jesus gives still another means of identifying who he is when he said, "I AM the true vine." Once again, Jesus does not share the stage with anyone else. He is the vine, and you are the branches. There is no question that there is a very close relationship between the vine and the branch. But everything flows from the vine to the branches and not the other way. Jesus describes this relationship as abiding. Abiding also means to dwell together. To remain together. To endure difficulties together. To continue together.

Yes, we are branches and Jesus is the vine. Jesus makes clear that when we are connected to the vine, we will bear much fruit. But apart from the vine, we can do nothing. Nor do we as fruit feed the vine and when we are not abiding with the vine, we will bear no fruit.

We often want to believe that a branch is the source of fruit and forget the vine that made it possible. When I hear of random acts of kindness as they are often described, I rarely hear any mention of how none of these acts of kindness are possible without Jesus the vine. After hearing about one act of kindness, you are encouraged to do likewise and see what good you can do for others. It is then that I AM who was the subject is replaced with ME. The source of fruit is no longer the vine, not the branches.

*You often see Philippians 4:13 quoted as a favorite passage of graduates as they move on to their next step in life. Listen to two ways this verse can be declared. "I **can** do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Notice who became the subject of the sentence and we gloss over the through Christ who strengthens me. This verse sounds much different when the emphasis is put on Christ. "I can do all things, **through Christ who strengthens me**. When your faith is in the true vine, it is only then that all things are possible. You could even say to a mulberry tree but uprooted and be thrown into the sea and it would happen. But we often fail to expect more to happen than what we are capable of instead of trusting the fruit that could be produced by abiding in the vine.*

Jesus also answered the next question in this I AM story about vines, branches, and fruit of how we are to abide in him. Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my WORDS abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. Abiding in my words does not mean the same thing as reading your bible.

The Ethiopian Eunuch which you heard about in the first lesson for today understood this difference. He was in fact reading from scripture when an angel of the Lord sent Philip to follow his chariot on the road. The eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah and Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch responded, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Therefore, the Lord sent Philip to this branch who was not yet connected to the vine. The eunuch didn't know if the words were from the prophet who had written these words or from someone else. It was then that Philip did what he was sent to do. He began to preach. And using the same scripture that the eunuch was reading, he preached to him the good news, the gospel of Jesus. When this eunuch's ears had now heard about Jesus and what he could do for him the eunuch noticed the water and asked if there was anything to prevent him from being baptized.

As Jesus, the true vine said, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. In this short encounter with Philip who delivered the good news of Jesus, there was nothing to prevent this baptism from happening. This was not just a rite of initiation into faith. Heaven was opened wide for the eunuch and there was nothing more he could have asked for than to be given eternal life through the waters of baptism. The eunuch was now abiding in Jesus and Philip's work was completed, so he was snatched away from this scene and Philip found himself in another city to proclaim more good news. Phillip was sent to graft more branches to the vine by God's word.

This has been a wonderfully busy time this spring with all the requests for baptisms. I have this story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in my mind whenever we receive a request for a baptism. When someone wants to be grafted to the vine in the waters of baptism, there should be nothing to prevent it from happening.

Jesus said, I AM the vine. You are the branches. You can do nothing apart from me. However, you will bear much fruit as you abide in my word as you have done again today. Amen