

Easter 5-April 28, 2024

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

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

“Removing Branches So That You Remain”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace mercy, and peace to you from God our Father who is the vine grower and from his Son, Jesus Christ who is the true vine. Amen

It is in the gospel of John that we learn the “I Am” statements about Jesus. These are different images describing who Jesus is and what he does. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the truth and the life, I am the light of the world”. Last we covered two more of these I am statements when Jesus said, “I am the door” and “I am the good shepherd.” Today, we hear the last of these statements about who Jesus is when he said, “I am the True Vine”.

Not only does Jesus tell us that he is the true vine, but he also tells us about who his Father is and what he does when he says, “My Father is the vine grower.” If you had hoped to get a lead role in this illustration about a vineyard, I’m sorry, but the lead roles have been claimed. God is the vine grower. Jesus is the true vine. You and I get to hang out as extras or background actors who are collectively called the branches.

Maybe we like the image of Jesus the good shepherd a little better than Jesus the true vine knowing that the good shepherd gives us what we need and protects and rescues us from danger. Jesus the good shepherd goes looking for us when we wander away and picks us up and carries us back to the fold. You can see a picture of Jesus the good shepherd in your mind doing this.

The image of our Heavenly Father waving a sharpened shear with a purpose of cutting away dead branches (and to remind you, we are the branches) from Jesus who is the true vine. That is one of the functions of the vine grower. The other is to prune away unnecessary branches that are preventing you from bearing good fruit. This image of God is not one who gives, but one who cuts away.

The job of pruning belongs only to the Father. But we often think that we could be so helpful to our heavenly Father if he would just allow us to operate his pruning shears every now and then. You and I know people who could benefit if we had the opportunity to prune the dead branches that we can see that are harming them or even the good things that they are spending too much time doing that are preventing them from producing even better fruit. However, this is not the role we get to play. You and I are the only branches who all need some pruning.

Kent Stillson is now the interim pastor at Willow Creek and Benton Lutheran church as they are in the call process of finding a new pastor. He has joined our text study group of pastors who meet almost every Tuesday morning. This past week, Pastor Stillson said one of his dad’s frequent sayings was, “Everyone needs a haircut now and then.” His dad may not have said this with a theological implication whenever he said it, but it certainly does fit here knowing that all of us are branches who need a little pruning. We all could use a haircut now and then.

After another winter seems to be coming to an end, as the warm weather and spring rains have started it is time again to start to cut our lawns every now and then. The more rain and sunshine we get, the more frequently we need to mow our lawns. Lawns seem to thrive when they have all they need, but then it is also when they need more frequent trimming.

When I look back at my sermons from 2020 and 2021, I used many illustrations that were connected to the Pandemic and what we were experiencing. When I think about that strange year, I am also reminded of what our Father the vine grower does to its branches. During the Pandemic, we had so many things cut out of our lives. Extra-curricular school activities were all canceled. Travelling to your place of work was often cut out and working from your own home became a possibility. Large groups who once gathered to enjoy a potluck meal were feared to become extinct as dinosaurs. As we were still trying to figure all of this out, it was the almost unanimous decision of all churches to close and wonder if or when the time would be safe to reopen. But one lesson was evident during that time, we not only existed when we had some of our beloved activities cut out of our schedules, but in some cases, we would have to admit, our lives may have been improved.

Four years have passed, and we have almost forgotten about the Pandemic, and we have once again filled our schedules to the point of wondering what branches we should leave or which ones should be cut. But just as we are not given the shears to tell others what they should cut from their lives, we are not the vine growers in our own lives. This story about the Vineyard is about the vine grower and the true vine. It is not about the branches.

It is hard for us to let go of what we think is important. It can even be hard for us to let go of what we know is harming us. The act of cutting often comes with a little suffering. I often have fun with the lady who cuts my hair and sometimes I go too far with my kidding around and she reminds me of who is holding the sharp scissors in her hand, and she is the one in control of the outcome of my haircut. The tool used for cutting branches may cause some suffering at first.

We are reminded today of the reason why our Heavenly Father decides to remove branches from our lives. He removes those things from our lives that prevent us from remaining with Jesus. Jesus wants us to abide, to remain, and to stay with him. We all need the sin pruned from our lives, but it also can be good things that dominate our time and prevent us from staying connected to the true vine Jesus Christ. When things seem to go well for us even when we don't spend much time abiding in Jesus, we believe we can do anything rather than as we learn in the gospel for today, we learn that apart from the vine we can do nothing.

The vine grower, our heavenly Father, wants us to bear good fruit. He wants us to be helpful to our neighbors. Jesus said that his Father is glorified when we produce good fruit. The fruit that we produce, the good works that we can do, become good only when we remain connected to the true vine, Jesus Christ. When we are connected to Jesus and know that it is only through him that our good works are possible, an abundant harvest of good fruit will be produced.

Grapes that are left on the vine to grow get better after some of the branches have been removed. The grapes that remain get better because they get everything they need from the vine. However, the grapes, the fruit of the branches will spoil if no one uses this fruit. The branches remain, but the fruit is produced for the benefit of others. We are also reminded that it is also not up to us who receives the benefit of the fruit.

Thanks be to God that he has removed a few of your branches today that may have prevented you from hearing from him today, so that you will remain connected to Jesus and bear good fruit for the sake of your neighbor and through this abiding in Jesus, God is indeed glorified. Amen.