

SERMON TEXT FOR EASTER 5B  
PREACHED APRIL 29, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA  
TEXT: JOHN 15:1-8

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus describes himself in a series of "I AM" statements. Now, normally a person would describe him or herself using adjectives - smart, pretty, compassionate, caring, forgiving, athletic. But not Jesus. Jesus uses phrases like:

I AM the bread of life

I AM the light of the world

I AM the gate for the sheep

I AM the resurrection and the life

I AM the good shepherd

I AM the vine.

Just last Sunday we talked about what it means for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd. Today's gospel lesson, which includes another one of these "I AM" statements, belongs to Jesus' familiar address to his disciples just prior to his Passion. In these chapters from John's gospel, Jesus prepares his disciples for his absence among them with the promise that they would not be abandoned or left alone, but instead could be confident that Christ would continue to be present with them in the world.

Jesus begins by saying that he is the "*true vine*," the source of growth and fruit-bearing, in a vineyard that is tended by the "*Father*." But Jesus' disciples get to play a role as well. "*I am the vine, you are the branches*." Notice that Jesus doesn't say that his disciples are the "fruit," the end product. Rather, he says we are the branches - the conduit for the vine's nourishment. And what makes the branches important is that the quality of the fruit depends on the branches' connectedness to the vine itself. What Jesus is describing here is the necessary interrelationship between himself and his disciples.

As I studied this passage this week, I kept coming back to the image of a newborn baby still connected to its mother's umbilical cord. That umbilical cord is literally that child's life-line while it is in the womb. Through the cord, a growing fetus gets its nourishment, which enables it to grow throughout those nine months. In the same way, the branch must stay connected to the vine for its very life and nourishment.

There are a couple of things that we branches need to remember in order to stay effectively and fruitfully connected to Jesus. First, we have to remember that branches are *fruit-bearing*, not *fruit-making*. Jesus tells the disciples, "*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing*." When a branch gets the idea that it can make fruit on its own, it dries up, withers, and is no longer useful.

Speaking of bearing fruit, "to bear fruit" is a common image in the Old Testament to speak of the community's faithfulness. But here, it is another way to speak about works of love required of Christ's followers. These works of love are a tangible sign of our discipleship.

Branches are able to bear fruit because they remain in the vine and the vine remains in them. Without the vine, no fruit is possible; in fact, nothing is possible. Throughout the gospel of John we hear this same theme over and over again: a disciple who does not abide in or with Jesus will find that his or her faith has withered. In this gospel, relationship is everything. So here Jesus makes it abundantly clear: a branch is useless unless it is connected to the vine, just as a disciple is fruitless if he or she is not abiding in, not connected to God - and, I would say, to the other branches.

Then we get to the uncomfortable part of Jesus' message. Jesus speaks of *cutting, pruning, being thrown into the fire and burned*. Gardeners, of course, know that cutting the dead stuff, weeding out what isn't growing, leads to more growth. It seems cruel to cut away at a living thing, but the pruning results in more production.

Yet, cutting away the dead growth - whether of a single plant or from the whole garden - is the only way for new life to take place. Jesus say, *"Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."* So, even the healthy need pruning.

So what does that kind of pruning look like for us? How do we experience it? Often it can be summed up in the word change. It's that thing we dread but know is necessary and inevitable. But how does it affect us individually or as a congregation? How does God prune us? Well, that's different for each person. Sometimes that pruning is easy to take - a new job, a new responsibility like parenthood, a new or renewed (or perhaps the end of) a relationship. But other types of pruning are much more difficult to accept, like the death of a loved one, a serious illness or disability, financial hardships, having to give up a long-held habit or joy, or responsibilities that require sacrifice on our parts, like taking care of a parent or spouse or working two jobs to put children through school or food on the table.

Let me be clear about something. I'm not saying that all bad things that happen in our lives are a result of God's pruning. I believe that things happen in our lives because of our humanity and our sinfulness. But I think what we can take from this text is that God takes those pruning times in our lives and helps us to become more fruitful. What are we if we don't learn from our mistakes, right?

And being a disciple doesn't spare us from being cut or pruned. The question isn't whether we'll experience some difficulty, some cutting or pruning in our lives. The question is whether that cutting and pruning will be the beginning of new growth (change) or whether it will just result in more withering. Perhaps this is a good way to look at our current situation here at Zion. We have been cut and pruned so drastically these last few years that we wonder if we will wither away or whether this is making the way for new growth, new fruit to emerge.

So, a few questions to ponder today:

1. What has been pruned out of your life in the last five years, and what new fruit has Jesus produced in your life during that time?
2. What in your life needs pruning right now?
3. What is preventing Jesus from producing new fruit in your life today, and in the life of Zion?