

“The True Vine”

Over the last year, our congregation has been working hard to restore the house at 829 West Jefferson. Our goal for this project was to take this rundown, abandoned property, restore it, and reintroduce it into the neighborhood as a home where a family could once again thrive. We are in the last stages of restoration and the house is absolutely beautiful, but this wasn't always the case.

When we bought the property, one of the biggest challenges we faced was an enormous vine that had completely engulfed the building. On the outside, the massive plant had swallowed up the brick chimney on the side of the house; in fact, you could hardly even see the chimney because of the vine's thick branches, and, instead, it appeared as though a bizarre tree was growing out of the roof. On the inside, branches from the vine had penetrated the foundation of the home and, as we began the demolition work, we even found small branches growing inside the kitchen cabinets. While the house itself looked dead, the vine was very much alive, and, before we could do anything to repair and restore the property, we had to deal with the vine.

A team of volunteers attacked the vine from every angle. One group worked on the roof to untangle the vine's branches from utility wires, another group worked on ladders and lifts to begin trimming the branches of the huge plant, but the most critical job of all was removing the roots of the vine. We used shovels and spades and axes, we dug and cut and tugged, but it felt like we would never be able to remove the roots. Finally, we tied the roots of the vine to a chain and ripped them out with truck. The work took all-day, but we were finally able to remove the roots and the vine and its branches from the house and, at the end of the day, the branches that seemed so strong when they were connected to the vine, sat in a pile behind the house already beginning to wither.

An experience like this gives you a new appreciation for what Jesus says in today's Gospel reading. He uses the image of a vine and its branches to help us better understand His relationship to His people, and, here, Jesus reveals some important truths beginning with these words: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

On a day when 27 of our young people will experience the rite of confirmation, these can be dangerous words. Let me explain what I mean. Today, these young brothers and sisters in Christ are making a personal confession of their faith. They will stand in front of the congregation and they will take a vow “to continue steadfast” in their confession “and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.” Pretty heavy stuff, and yet, as earnest as they are about their confirmation vows, and as reverent and solemn as the setting may be, this is not a vow they can keep. And we know this is true from our own lives.

Every day we find ourselves fighting against the Vine and following our own sinful inclinations. Our lives don't bear the fruit they should and our hearts continue to resist the Holy Spirit. Last week, our Scripture reading referred to us as “sheep who love to stray” and this is a perfect description of us because our natural tendency is always to remove ourselves from the body, to disconnect from the Vine and go our own way. Even those of us who consider ourselves to be committed Christians, spend our time and energy focusing on everything else but the Vine and in our sin we wither. On our own, our confirmation vows are impossible for us to keep. Left on our own, we will always turn away from Jesus and we will always deny His name...and so did His disciples.

It's so important for us to remember that Jesus spoke the words of our text to His disciples just hours before they would betray and curse Him. These men, on whose confession the church would be built; these men, who would ultimately suffer death for the sake of Jesus; these men, on this night, would save their own skin, these men, on this night, would walk away from Jesus, and these men, on this night, would bear no fruit. So why did Jesus speak these words? Because these words are not about the disciples...and these words are not about us...these words are about Him! He is the Vine that gives life to the branches; He is the vine that always bears fruit; He is the vine that endures and abides and will never be uprooted. These words are about Jesus! And so is your confession!

Today, we don't celebrate our own spiritual resolution or achievement or commitment. Today, the Word of God points us back to the Vine and together we proclaim and we cling to the promises of God that give us forgiveness, life and a future. Today, all of us – confirmands and congregants, parents and sponsors – all of us celebrate and point to the faith that we were given in Baptism when we received the Name of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of our sins. In this act of God, He claimed us and He named us and He gave us the faith to believe in His promise. That's what we celebrate today!

In every baptism, the pastor says, "The Word of God...teaches us that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own...But the Father of all mercy and grace has sent His Son Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sin of the whole world, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." And that's why we are here today.

My friends, God has acted in your lives. Or, as Luther wrote: He has called you by the Gospel. He has enlightened you with His Gifts, He has sanctified and kept you in the one true faith, and with this understanding of God's work for you, today, Jesus speaks to you, and He says: "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

The Greek word translated here as "abide" is a wonderful word because not only can this word carry the sense of encouragement for us to remain or continue in Christ, but, more importantly, it can also mean "to be held and kept continually" by Christ. You see, on this day, God is confirming the promise He made to you and to all of us in Baptism, and the promise He gives us today is that even when we stray, and even when deny and even when we betray, He will never give up on us, and He will never leave us, and, today, He has given us His very body and blood as pledge that He will always keep His promises.

Earlier, I talked about the stubborn vine that we had to deal with when we worked on the house next door. No matter what we did, it seemed like that thing would never die, and, today, this image is a great reminder to us that in Jesus Christ, we have a true Vine that continues to live, and will continue to feed us, and, by His Spirit, will bring us to bear much fruit in our lives. Today, because of what God has done for you in Jesus, you can confess your faith with boldness and you can abide in peace and hope and without fear or guilt or shame, because the true Vine lives, and in Him you will continually be held, and you will continually be kept, and you will bear much fruit. Go in peace and abide in the true Vine. Amen.

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