

May 2, 2021

John 15:1-8

“You Are Branches in Jesus!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When I was very young I took a dead branch and stuck it into the ground to see if it might grow. You don't need me to tell you that the stick did not come back to life. Despite the soil, the rain, and the sun, it remained a dead branch and by now is long gone. So it is with any branch when it is cut off from the stem. It wilts and dies until it is fully dead and returns to the ground.

It is strange to consider that we were conceived and born as dead branches. That's what we are told in Psalm 51:5 and Romans 5:12. We appear to be very much alive, but when it comes to our relationship with God, we come into life down here as dead as dead can be. Our dead relationship with God becomes plain to see as we struggle with creation and other people and finally grow old and turn to dust. Life is this way for all of us because we all would have eaten from the forbidden fruit in the garden if we had been there at the beginning. We are just as guilty as our first parents for destroying all the gifts that God gave.

It was really silly for me to take a dead branch and stick it into the ground to see if it might grow again. And yet much of what we do down here is a silly attempt to bring life out of death. We are always looking for the right place to plant ourselves. A place that will take away our groaning since everything is all messed up down here, including ourselves. We seek a real and lasting connection to relieve the loneliness that we feel. At first glance, it appears as if there are many things that will help us such as pursuing an education, acquiring a spouse and family, having a great career, accumulating lot's of money and material things, grabbing power and position, or maybe pursuing a simple life of impure living where we pursue the sinful desires of the flesh - you know, whatever turns us on. We love to stick dead branches into the ground while hoping that they will bring true happiness that is without end.

But it all comes to an end. When you're young you dupe yourself into believing that time is on your side and old age and death are far away. That is why we take the words of Solomon seriously:

Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" [before you grow old and your body falls apart and you are afraid of everything and when everything you have wears out or is broken] and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 11:10-12:8).

Do you know what Solomon means when he says that "youth and the dawn of life are vanity?" He means that without Christ, you are left with nothing but a consideration of yourself, and when you are left with yourself and selfishly love yourself, you are left with nothing but loss.

What if I were to tell you that dead branches, such as ourselves, can actually come to life? For those of us who know and believe in Christ we are not surprised at this. Rather, we find the thought to be incredibly comforting. How can it happen that dead branches become alive and remain alive so that something good might even come from them?

You might remember the account of the high priest Aaron who was a prophetic illustration of Jesus, the true high priest who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world. When the first high priest was chosen to represent Jesus, the twelve staffs (twelve dead branches) of the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel were placed in front of the presence of the Lord. We are told in Numbers 17:8, “On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.”

What do we learn from this text? A dead branch can come to life and blossom into good produce. The dead wooden staff of Aaron that came to life and bore almonds, not only chose the high priest who would represent Jesus, but that once dead, wooden staff that came to life and bore fruit before God was about Jesus who would sacrifice himself and die for us to make us alive to be his produce. Even more, he himself has become the stem from which all branches live and are sustained to also bear a produce because of all he’s done. Because you believe that Jesus lived a perfect life for you, and suffered and died for your sins, and rose from the dead so that you might also rise and live forever, **You Are Branches In Jesus!**

What does it mean to be in Jesus? After all, he says in our lesson (15:5), “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.” How can this be? The great miracle of the church is that the benefits of the death and resurrection of Jesus are given and remain in us through the Word and Sacraments, the means of grace. Through the law and gospel we die to sin and are raised in forgiveness. In Baptism, we have been given a holy name. Our sins have been washed away and our new name is a righteousness that is ours in Jesus. Because of his righteousness we are accepted and possess eternal life.

You Are Branches In Jesus because he has made you his own by the power of his Good Spirit. The faith that you have to receive everything in him is a great gift from God, not by works so that anyone may boast. The faith that lives in your hearts is what joins you to Christ. When we miraculously trust in his many promises we are joined to him and share him and all that he has both now and forever. As Jesus says in our gospel lesson: “... you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you (John 15:3).” Not only are we united with Jesus by faith in his word of forgiveness, but this relationship continues by faith - faith created and sustained by the Holy Spirit in the means of grace. If you wish for Jesus to remain in you and you in him, so that when you die everything will be okay, it is vital to remain in the means of grace, for it is only there that you will find Jesus, until you see him face to face.

Therefore, every single day, we are invited to meditate on God’s Word and live our Baptisms. Every single day, whenever we die to sin, confess our sins, and hear the Gospel and rest in the forgiveness of sins, our faith is exercised and grows stronger and stronger. Often we are invited to come to the Lord’s Supper, where Jesus says to us over and over again, “I love you. You are forgiven and you are mine forever. Let this meal point to our being with each other forever in the great heavenly feast where we will dine on all that is love, everything that can be, all that is true happiness without end!” Nourished in this way, we draw upon the strength and power that Jesus is talking about in our lesson when he says, “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 (John 15:4).” A living faith is like our physical body. Both need food.

Only with the spiritual nourishment in the means of grace will we survive and reach the heaven that is ours in Jesus. To that end we do not neglect meeting together where the Word of God is preached in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's command. If we fail to hear God's Word and cease to draw strength from our Baptism and the Supper, we will wilt and die. Severed from the stem, the branches wither and die. Severed from Jesus, the good produce disappears and we die.

Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser. 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 ... If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned (John 15:1, 6)." With these words of our Savior, we are left with two final thoughts. Both of them are very strong warnings from Jesus.

First, every gardener knows that plants yield more fruit when they are pruned. Like a plant, God will tend and cultivate you. Whatever trials you will go through will be so that you may flourish. Remember that when you go through trials. God is doing great things even in those moments when it feels he is out to get you.

Secondly, hold onto the joy of being branches in Jesus and do not neglect the Word and Sacraments. Do not get so busy that Jesus becomes unimportant, for this would be the greatest folly imaginable. The consequences are eternal.

Today **You Are Branches In Jesus!** My prayer for each and every one of you is that you will remain branches in Jesus for the rest of your lives, and that you will be forever in him! But remember, it is Jesus by his Spirit in the means of grace who makes dead branches alive, and only Jesus by his Spirit in the means of grace can keep us alive to even bear glorious and abundant fruit as his followers! Apart from him we are nothing! Therefore, remain in him and he will remain in you.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott