

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:25-31

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

### Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

[Jesus said:] 1“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Cut-off

Good morning! Now, this may come as a surprise to some of you, but I used to be in much better shape. Back in high school I ran cross country and track. I was never very fast, but what was slow by high school standards is still in great shape by average church pastor standards. It all started in the summer. I woke up around 6:30 every morning and got dressed, drank some water, and rode my bike the mile to the school for cross country practice. I ran the prescribed workout, then rode my bike the mile or two to Crummitt & Son where I would work for the rest of the day and go home with my dad. Come fall it was school and then practice until the end of the season. During the winter I spent my time in the gym, lifting weights after school, and then come January I would go to track conditioning for the sprinters AND the distance runners. Spring was track season, and then come summer it started back all over again. By the fall of my freshman year I was running 8 miles at a time and 9.3 miles on cross country race days.

But then I got injured. I took a break from the end of cross country and decided I just didn't want to commit to something like that again. Little by little the running stopped, and little by little the working out ended, and before you knew it I hadn't exercised in a year. It can be so strange to be cut off from something that seemed like such an important part of my life for so long. The longer I was away, the easier it became to tell myself I would get back to it. I was cut off, separated from the source.

That can easily happen in our faith lives too. We all know someone (or have been that someone!) who has slipped away, little by little, until you couldn't remember the last time they were a part of the community. The strange thing about it all is that it's entirely self-inflicted.

When you first look at today's Gospel lesson it can sound a little harsh and convicting. "*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.*" And in verse 6: "*Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*" Why would God cause some of us to bear no fruit? And why is God cutting us down and throwing us into the fire? But just like my story about cross country and our decision to be cut-off from our faith, it too is entirely self-inflicted. God doesn't cause us to not bear fruit, God doesn't cut us off from the true vine, it's our decision to be removed. And just like any plant that stops taking nutrients from the host, we kill ourselves little by little until we're only left with a husk of our former beauty.

I heard another parable that was trying to communicate the same principle. A couple who attended church regularly were getting on in their years. It was apparent that the church was much more important to the wife than it was to the husband, but even he was an active part of the community. One night the pastor got the call that the wife had died. The pastor did the funeral, visited frequently after her death and thought that the husband would return to church after a few weeks. But weeks turned into months and so the pastor decided to visit the man. They sat by the fire and caught up on life, sharing stories, rich with laughter and tears. After a while the husband asked the pastor why he hadn't mentioned the fact that he hadn't been to church in while. The pastor looked at the man and quietly went over to the fire, took out the tongs and pulled out a piece of burning wood and set it on the stone floor a few feet away. He didn't say anything, but

as the flame died down and the smoldering stopped the pastor had said more with those actions than any words could accomplish. They went back to talking and at the end of the visit the man promised to see the pastor Sunday at church. When we take ourselves away from the source, we can't thrive, we can't burn with all the brilliance God intended! Pick your metaphor, the point is the same. If we want to survive, if we want to live life in its fullest, we need God and we need one another.

Now, I've had you talk to one another during my sermons enough that it's not a surprise anymore, so I figured I needed another way to keep you on your toes. I'm going to hand out some index cards and I'm going to ask you to answer a few questions.

1. What is something in your life, or at this church, that has helped to keep you connected to God?
2. What might we do to help others who might feel cut-off or lost?

Now this final question is only for you to think about, you don't need to write down your answer. Is there anyone in your life who needs YOUR help to be grafted back into the vine?

As the Beatle's song goes, "I get along with a little help from my friends." It can sometimes feel weird but God had chosen to work through the lives of us human beings. We become Jesus Christ for others, and so it falls to us to help show Christ to those around us. We're never going to be a perfect people, but God works to make wondrous things happen. Listen again to Jesus' words: "*3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide*

*in me as I abide in you. Just 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.” Amen.*