

SERMON FOR SUN. MAY 2, 2021

Easter 5B John 15:1-8 Divine Gardening.

Dear fellow redeemed, Alleluia! Christ is risen! Jesus told us today: **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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.”**

What’s the difference between “taking away” branches on the one hand and pruning on the other? Jesus mentions both in the verses I just read. But how can you tell one from the other? Both involve a plant, both involve branches, and both involve cutting. But there are two entirely different results.

While I’m no expert gardener, I’ve wielded scythes and pruners before. At times, I intended to prune a plant to make it more fruitful, but what I wound up doing is cutting off its branches and killing it.

And the opposite is true as well. There are times when I try to take away a plant, only to have it come back more robust than ever! Perhaps you’ve made the same sort of mistakes I made.

So intent, or sincerity, isn’t the key.

No, what makes the difference between taking away and pruning ***is the eye and skill of the one with the blade.***

Branches that I think are dead and fruitless, the skillful eye of the pruner will leave. That’s why it’s critical to have gardeners who know what they’re doing.

What a blessing then, that when it comes to our lives as Christians, our divine gardener knows exactly what He’s doing.

Our heavenly Father knows which branches are dead and which are not. He knows how to prune branches to make us more fruitful.

Our Creator/Father knows how to best care for us. **“I am the true vine,”** Jesus said, **“and my Father is the vinedresser.”**

So, the good news this morning is that we are in good hands! But ***knowing that and believing it*** to be true is ultimately a matter of faith.

Faith trusts that when the blade is coming down on you, and it feels as if you’re being cut off, punished, or thrown away, your Father’s careful eye and skillful hand are not cutting you off, but pruning you so that you bear more fruit.

Now, to our untrained and disbelieving eyes, it may not look or seem that way. We feel what’s happening to ourselves, and begin to think the worst about God.

But while our minds may assume the worst, faith believes the best and trusts the merciful and compassionate hand of our Father in heaven.

God's gardening work connects and keeps us in Christ, and that work began for you at the font of Holy Baptism. There, you were cleansed and given the new life of faith by the Holy Spirit.

Whether you were baptized as an infant, child or adult, the same hand of God took us and joined us to Jesus so that we grow in Him and He in us. For, **He the vine and we the branches.**

We heard about a baptism today: the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and how God worked to bring Him to the water of Baptism and life. It sounded all simple and easy.

Yet what hardships and struggles had the eunuch endured? What brought him to the point where he'd traveled hundreds of miles to worship in Jerusalem? Was the eunuch's story extraordinary? Yes, in some ways.

But no more extraordinary than yours, and how your Father has worked in your life, through His Word, through His servants, through the water, to connect you to, and keep you in, Christ.

It's not always easy, but in the end, like the eunuch, we too will go our way rejoicing.

But God's gardening work doesn't end at the Baptismal font.

God doesn't give us new life and then leave us on our own to make the best of it; we aren't left alone to see if we will make it to the finish line of heaven.

No, the hand of our Father-Vinedresser continues to work, to keep you in the life He has given you **in Christ.**

Sadly, we often wander from the straight and narrow, drinking in the so-called wisdom of the world instead of the true wisdom of Christ Words.

Growing into the ways of the world instead of the ways of Christ. Branching off in directions contrary to Christ and His life. Wild branches, we might call ourselves. Perhaps branches that the blade ought to chop down?

But which blade? A scythe to give up on us, cut us off, and throw us away? Or a pruner lovingly applied with a skillful eye, at just the right time, that we grow right again?

And how do we know? How can we tell the difference between a scythe and a pruner? Well, we can know by looking to the cross. For there we see that Jesus was cut off in our place.

He did so by taking all our sin, all our wildness, all our rebellion, all our unfruitfulness upon Himself, and receiving the death blade of the Father in our place.

What we deserve, He received. Jesus's words on the cross demonstrate that he was cut off, so we could be grafted in.

My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me? Cut off from the Creator.

I thirst. Cut off from the life and juice of the vine.

It is finished. Dead. Cast away. Ready to be burned.

Except: the fires of hell cannot consume Jesus - He is victorious over them.

The bonds of the grave cannot keep Him - He bursts them.

The penalty of sin cannot enslave Him – it's been paid in full.

And so, the Tree of Life lives again! The true and new Tree of Life, its way once barred because of sin, gives life to you.

For He is the vine, the tree, you have been grafted onto. His life is now your life. A new life, a true life, that is yours to live now, and to live forever.

The death and resurrection of Jesus shows us that the blade we often feel in our lives is no blade of death but a blade of life. For those connected to Christ, death is done, and life now reigns.

Our merciful and compassionate Father prunes us only to discipline us, to correct us, and to get us to grow straight, so that we might produce more and better fruit - to keep us in Christ.

And so, He daily calls us back to the font in repentance, calling us to Christ, to wash again in His absolution - His forgiveness - and be once again raised with Christ to a new life.

He calls us back to the altar, to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ - the fruits of the new Tree of Life - to be nourished and fed, forgiven, and raised with Christ to a new life.

He calls us back to the Gospel, that we abide in Christ and Christ in us, producing the fruits of faith. Not our fruits, mind you, but the fruits of Christ and His Spirit, which come from Him and then flow through us, his branches, to our neighbors.

Jesus said, "**Apart from Him, we can do nothing,**" because apart from Him, we are dead. Dead, lifeless, dried up branches.

But abiding in Him, we not only have life but His *promise*: that we will produce fruit.

Please note that Jesus issues no commands to produce fruit in these verses - only **the promise** of fruit.

The command is to abide in Christ.

As we do so, He will work in you and through you, producing the fruit of lips that confess His name and the fruit of love that loves others as He has loved us.

So, the key to spiritual gardening is not anything in us or what we do, but in Christ and what He has done. In other words, it's a JESUS4U thing.

Connected to Him, His love becomes our love, His compassion our compassion, His life our life. A life to live, a life to lay down for others, if needs be, but a life that will never end.

And if you feel like that pruning blade has been at work on you overtime, well, **thanks be to God** for such attention, love, and care.

Thanks be to God that your life and love matter that much to Him. Thanks be to God that *Christ is risen!* And thanks be to God that Jesus' life now lives in you. Amen.