

The 5th Sunday of Easter: Holy Trinity Church: April 29, 2018

John 15: 1-8: *How Do You Treat Your Waiter?*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Jesus said to his disciples, *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*

In Jesus parable from John’s Gospel, he likens himself to a vine, while the fruit bearing branches here are His disciples. God the farmer is depicted as the one who cultivates the vineyard. He waters and tends the soil, so that the vine is properly nourished. He takes pride in his crop. But this means that he also prunes the vines and removes the dead wood. The grapes hang on to the branches. What Jesus is saying is clear. The disciples should receive their strength from Jesus. He is the true vine. If they break away from him, they will be like unproductive branches and die and bear no fruit. They will then

have to be pruned out. So, my sisters and brothers, what do you make of this analogy in terms of our daily life? What does it mean to be God's vineyard?

First, I think that it raises a question and a challenge that we must all answer: Are we bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God? How can you tell when you are truly a disciple of Jesus Christ? How can you tell a pear tree? You can tell by the fruit that he or she bears fruit. How can you tell an apple tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ? By the fruit that he or she bears. It is just as simple as that. The fruits of the vine are not church attendance, or Biblical knowledge, or your individual stewardship, or your pledge. Even though all of those things are important, the true fruit of the vine is a loving and compassionate heart.

Folks, it all comes down to this question, "How do you treat other people? That is simple and as direct as I can put it to you. I want you to think about how you treat a waiter, or a bank teller, or the receptionist you check in with in your doctor's or dentist office or the person who delivers your newspaper or mail, etc., etc.? Think about them. Do you treat them with respect or do you look down your nose on them?

I want to tell you about a parishioner knew when I was a Roman Catholic seminarian in a church I served many years ago in St. Patrick's Church in

Pelham, New Hampshire. I heard people kept saying: “*She is such a religious person.*” It is true that every time she came to church she brought her Bible with her. Indeed, everywhere she would go all over town she took her Bible with her. It seemed like the subject of religion was always on her mind, in fact, almost to a fault. She almost didn't know how to carry on a simple conversation without bringing that up. I didn't have any problem with any of these things. The problem that I had was that when it came to people who were down and out in society such as the poor, the unemployed, divorced persons, alcoholics, drug addicts, men and women of loose morals, she was relentless in her criticism. She was without mercy, compassion, caring and most importantly, love. She was quite open that their future was fire and brimstone, judgment and hell, damnation and nothing else. After a while, despite all of these outward appearances of religion, and despite everyone calling her a "religious" person, I had to begin asking myself the question: Does this individual really bear the fruits of the Christian life? Does she possess a loving heart that manifests itself in kindness, compassion, reconciliation, justice and peace?

My brothers and sisters in Christ, the issue is not how much knowledge you have or even necessarily how sincere you are. The issue is how do you treat people? How do you treat your waiter? Think about it. If you are in Jesus

Christ will others be able to see the fruits of your life in terms of your compassion and love and a positive and joyful attitude towards the most vulnerable. Those are powerful words and I hope you will give them your undivided attention for just a few moments. There is an important message here, Jesus said, “. . . my Father is the vine grower. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

These words are directed to both churches and to individual church members. Christ is the true vine. We are the branches. And we have but one job. That is to bear fruit. That is why we have been called together as a community. We are not here simply to enjoy one another’s company. We are here to be nourished in word and sacrament so that we may bear fruit in our homes, in our community and in the world for which Christ died. So the question and the challenge for the week is where is your fruit? Is our church a better church because you are here? Is your home a better home because you are there? Is the world a better place because you are here? Where is your fruit? I think how you treat your waiter or waitress speaks volumes about your heart? We could be doing so much more for the sake of the Kingdom, but we have forgotten that our main task is to make a difference in the world. Our main task is to make Christ known in this community, in this church. Our main

task is to help people know that they are loved, cared for and wanted. Our main task, in other words, is to bear fruit. Jesus put it as pointedly as possible. The barren tree, that is, the tree that does not bear fruit--will be thrown into the fire. That's more vivid imagery and a little bit scary. The tree that does not bear fruit will be thrown into a fire. But what good is a grape vine without grapes? What use is a fig tree without figs? In other words, tear those things that separate you from God and one another and strip those branches in your life that do not bear fruit and throw them into the flames. Get rid of them. Nothing could be clearer than this principle: we are to bear fruit. That's our job. Now how do we go about doing that?

First of all, we produce fruit by staying connected to the vine. Later in this passage Christ says, *"Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing . . ."*

Again, the message is clear. The secret to bearing fruit is staying connected to Christ.

So, what are the fruits of the disciples of Jesus Christ? In Paul's Letter to the Galatians 5:22-23: He tells us straight up: the fruits of the spirit are love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

That's an important rule because if we 21st disciples are to bear fruit, we must stay connected to the vine which is Jesus Christ. He only is the source of our life. I hope that is the primary reason you are here in church to worship today. We must stay connected to Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament so that Christ in us can bear much fruit.

My dear sisters and brothers, when tragedy comes, as it does in every life, there is no sense in asking God, 'Why did this happen to me?' That is one question God never seems to answer. Here's the question you should ask when tragedy strikes, 'Lord, is there some way you can use this event in my life to prune me and cause me to bear more fruit unto your glory?'" I guarantee that is one question that will always receive a positive answer.

Maybe this is the difference between those who are "cut off" and those who are "pruned." It never occurs to those who are cut off to ask that question. They aren't interested in bearing fruit. So tragedy is meaningless. They may even view it as punishment from God. All that is left for them is to lash out at God in anger. But the person who is able to pray in the face of great tragedy, "Lord, is there some way you can use this event to prune me and cause me to

bear more fruit unto your glory?” will find a source of strength they never dreamed possible.

I knew a couple who had just given birth. The father was told that “there were problems with the birth.” The doctor said to the new parents, “You have a baby boy. But there are some problems. Your child has been born with Down syndrome. Your baby also has a rather minor, but correctable respiratory condition. My recommendation is for you to consider just letting nature take its course, and then in a few days there shouldn’t be a problem.” The couple seemed confused by what the doctor told them. “If the condition can be corrected, then we want it corrected,” said the husband. His wife immediately nodded in agreement. “You must understand,” said the doctor, “that studies show that parents who keep these children have a high incidence of marital distress, separation and divorce. Is it fair for you to bring this sort of suffering upon your other two children and your marriage?” At the mention of the word “suffering,” it was as if the doctor finally began speaking the woman’s language. She said, “Our children have had every advantage in the world. They have really never known suffering, never had the opportunity to know it. I don’t know if God’s hand is in this or not, but I could certainly see why it would make sense for a child like this to be born into a family like ours. Our children will do just fine. When you think about

it, this is really a great opportunity.” The doctor looked confused and abruptly departed. You see, I see the couple was already using reason, but it was reasoning that was foreign to that of the doctor. It’s reasoning that is foreign to all of those who are among the “cut-off.” It says that God can use all things to the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). It doesn’t mean that God causes bad things to happen to good people. He doesn’t have to send bad things into our lives. A fallen world will send enough trouble on its own. But it does say that God can use any difficult event that occurs in our lives to help us become the kind of people He has called us to be.

Can you do that my sisters and brothers? Can you take any adverse trial in your life and pray, “Lord, is there some way you can use this event to prune me and cause me to bear more fruit to your glory?” Amen.