

Sermon for Jubilate Sunday – John 15:1-8

“¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every 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. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶If 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. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

When God first called Moses and told him to free the people of Israel, Moses' first question was, "How and I supposed to do that, and by what authority can I accomplish such a great task?" God replied, "I give you my name. 'I AM who I AM' sends you, and you are not to act in your own name but in mine." The Gospel of John is full of these "I AM" statements, which Jesus gives for us to take along on our journey. In the text above, Jesus says, "I am the true vine." He speaks these words just as He was about to say goodbye to His disciples. He gives His disciples (and thereby us as well) His commandment and will to take with us after He is no longer visible to our sight. Not only that, but just like with Moses, He gives us a mission. This mission from our Lord draws our attention to three things: 1) We can rest in His name, 2) in His name, we are set in motion, and 3) in His name, we are called to abide.

First, we can rest in His name. The image of the vine and the branches is meant to tell us, first and foremost that Jesus is the vine which God has planted in His garden. Jesus is meant to be there entirely for us, and we are meant to be the branches that are allowed to grow from Him. The branches are simply resting in the vine. They are not commanded to do anything they are unable to do, nor are they manipulated or made to feel guilty because they so often fail. Instead, one simple fact is affirmed: the branches are part of the vine. There is no call to either activism or fatalism. It simply states what *is*. We are part of the vine.

That is precisely why the image of the vine that Jesus gives us is so crucial and so comforting. Jesus wants to tell us that we are united with Him. This union with Jesus is physical and real. Through our baptism, a connection to Jesus (and thereby to God) is established. There's no going back. This connection to Jesus is not merely a footnote in our lives but also determines everything, including our will and our ability. The relationship stands firm, and it stands firm because of Jesus Himself who gives us this promise as we go along our way. "I am the vine. You are the branches."

This image of the vine and branches is fixed and static, yet there is still movement within it. Life flows from the vine into the branches and the branches bear fruit. All the while, God the Father is in motion. He looks upon the branches, seeks fruit, and prunes them so that even more fruit may be produced. I imagine God a little bit like the gardener who looks longingly at the window boxes to see if anything is growing there yet. So God, too, eagerly seeks the first signs of fruit, for there can *never* be enough. This is because the hunger in our world is so great. The need is so great. In our world, the opposite of life and growth seems to reign. In our world, death is ever-present. There is all too much death! Too much unnecessary dying! People are senselessly slaughtered. Others are destroyed emotionally and spiritually. They can never experience the love that comes from God. They cannot grow. There is indescribable suffering, and an indescribable hunger for life and joy. Instead, people reap hatred, envy, and murder time and time again. Because the hunger is so great, God needs a bountiful harvest. That is why He strives so hard. That is why, generation after generation, He has called people who live and speak from His power. Even now, God watches over His plant, the Church, with great care. He seeks the fruit that

is so desperately needed. He looks out for every Christian and every single congregation. There, He sees a young shoot coming into view and our God who is already radiant with joy rejoices together with all the heavenly hosts!

How disappointing it must be for our heavenly Father when the fruit fails to appear. He knows, better than anyone else, the need and hunger of this world. He also knows, better than anyone else, what is needed. How great His disappointment must be when, exactly at the junction between the vine and the branch, between the Church and God, something stalls and the fruit simply does not come. In today's parable, Jesus tells us that God simply cuts off such branches that bear no fruit. In concrete terms, this means that where the Church simply sits on its gifts; where the Church remains stuck in its own existence and has not a single word for the people of its time; where the Church ceases to pray for its contemporaries in prayer and with tears; where the Church no longer seeks the way to its fellow humans and has no word left for these people, that is where the Father must simply cut off the branch.

The picture Jesus paints for us is shocking. It shows that the vines have a purpose: they are meant to bear fruit. It does not explicitly state what this fruit is, and there is a specific reason for this: the fruit itself is diverse. For one person, it may be that he or she receives the gift from God to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a down-to-earth, creative way. For another, the fruit may lie hidden as they pray for their fellow people and congregation. Every single vine, Jesus emphasizes, is involved with its own special gifts. The image of growing fruit is a vital one and shows that our Christian life is in motion. Those who live, move, eat, drink, go to work, etc., are those who are bound into God's vine and live out the faith they have received. God Himself is looking longingly for the fruit that is produced.

To close, there is a call. A call to abide: "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." The danger is very real that we will not abide. This can happen in many ways. It may be that someone does not see themselves as a branch, but as a gardener and acts recklessly, treating others as if they were God Himself, pruning and cutting people back according to their own selfish thoughts and plans. This danger exists among us Christians as well. We can confuse our roles. We think we must manage the Church on our own, otherwise everything will fall apart. But that's a lie. We are not the ones who save the Church. We are the branches, not the vine-grower. This is of great importance.

The fruit grows in us because we are connected to the vine. It is the connection alone. Our task is not to frantically look for the fruit. That is the gardener's task. There are many temptations that seek to distract us from simply abiding in the vine. For some reason, it becomes too restrictive. Pruning the branches hurts, and we do not like to hear criticism, but when we know that God Himself is behind it and that it is for our own good, we can endure abiding in Him.

Jesus speaks to us as living people and urges us to abide. Abiding bears fruit, but abiding in Jesus does not mean a group of branches form a committee and decide to stay with Jesus of their own accord. No, abiding in Jesus is something we find has already been established. There is no better promise than Jesus' own words: "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." Abiding in Jesus brings us back to the beginning. Everything we are has already been determined. When we are baptized, we have put on Christ. He is part of our identity. As if by itself, the image of the vine leads us to the Lord's Supper: "Whoever eats my body and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him."

The conclusion of the image of the vine has a purpose. The purpose is joy, a joy that delights in God and His gifts. It is a joy that does not merely trigger a fleeting sense of happiness but leads to the praise of God.

Amen.