

“Abide in Me”

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: In today's Gospel, Jesus calls himself the True Vine, and we his disciples are the branches. Since not everyone grows grapes, a bit of explanation may help us to understand how fitting an image this is. A grape *vine* is the main part of the plant that remains standing on the trellis year after year. It consists of the root, a single thick trunk that rises maybe six feet, and then divides into two as it spreads out right and left on the trellis – these days they use steel cables for that. You end up with a T shape. When I was stationed in California, I can remember in the winter months driving up the Salinas valley where Paul Mason and some of the other big wine producers had their vineyards. From a distance the hills on either side of the valley look almost like military cemeteries with rows and rows of dark crosses standing in straight lines. Up close each vine uncannily suggests the upper torso of a man with his arms spread out as if being crucified – and I'm pretty sure that's why Jesus chose this particular image.

Anyway, it's from the vine that in the spring each year grow forth the rope-like branches on which the leaves and eventually the fruit will form. These branches need to be trained by a vinedresser to attach themselves to the trellis for support. By themselves they can't bear the weight of the fruit that will grow on them. And unsupported the grapes would end up on the ground and be ruined. Branches that grow out at right angles to the trellis are simply removed. There's no point in allowing the plant to waste its energy on branches that will prove useless in the end. And even the properly trained branches need to be pruned now and then to prevent unhelpful growth and to maximize fruit production. If all goes well, with plenty of sunshine and an occasional rain shower, in the fall the grapes will be harvested. And after that, all the branches, having done their duty, are removed; leaving behind just the bare vines to await next spring's reawakening.

All of this gives us a better idea of what Jesus means when he says that he is the True Vine. Our lives as branches spring forth from him – and specifically from his death for us on the cross. That's the life-giving truth from which we sprang from the very start. It happened when we were baptized into Christ and into his death, burial, and resurrection. And it's to this life-giving truth that we need to remain connected at all times through the hearing of the preaching of Law and Gospel, through confession and absolution, and through the Lord's Supper in which we receive into ourselves the very body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. These are the means by which we abide in Christ and he in us.

And this is why Jesus says to us, “See that you do abide in me. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” The Lord has a goal for us: that we bear fruit for him. What kind of fruit? First, the fruit of repentance: of sorrow for sin and the desire to turn from it. Then comes the fruit of faith; faith that receives the righteousness that comes not of doing but rather of trusting in Jesus and his sacrificial death for sin. And finally comes the fruit of love for God and for others that is worked in us by the power of the Holy Spirit whom we receive through the Word of Jesus' true teaching. We, the branches, can only bear these fruits for the Lord if we continue to abide in Christ. Therefore we make it our goal to abide in him and bear the fruit the Lord desires, because the alternative is pretty grim.

What's that? Well, Jesus tells us: "Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he [the Father] takes away." You have no fear of the Lord? Not concerned about his judgments? See no need to repent of your sin? Okay. Have it your way. Snip, snip. You're no longer connected to Christ. See how far you get that way. Likewise, you decide you don't need to abide in Jesus. You don't need the gifts of grace he delivers through his Word and Sacrament. You don't need to hear his teaching and cleansing Word of forgiveness. You choose to separate yourself from the life of the church which is the body of Christ. Then like a branch separated from the vine you will dry up. And then you'll be gathered together with the other dead branches to be burned in the fire. I'm guessing I don't have to tell you what Jesus means by that.

This is serious business. And all the more so today for we are observing the Rite of Confirmation for three of our young members. They have been baptized into Christ and so are connected to his death for sin. They've been catechized in the truths of Jesus and his holy Church. And in short order they will be declaring their sincere and unwavering faith in their Savior. They'll pledge to continue to abide in Jesus by faithfully and regularly hearing his Word and receiving his Holy Supper. They will promise to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it. And when they say these things I have no doubt that they will truly mean them.

But the odds are against them. I pray that it's not the case, but if they are representative of the normal statistics, then in just ten years, by the time they're 25 years old, two of the three will have stopped abiding in Jesus the True Vine. And it won't be due to some sudden crisis that rattles their faith or an overwhelming conviction that they were taught incorrectly. No, it's more likely to be the cares and concerns of the world, the temptations of the flesh, and the soft seduction of spiritual laziness that lulls them to sleep. They won't even know they've been cut off from Christ and that their faith has withered and dried up until it's too late. And by then they won't care.

I say these things now as a warning to them in the hope that they'll not let it happen; but it's also a warning that we all need to hear and take to heart. The reason Jesus is so emphatic about our need to continue abiding in him and his teaching is precisely because every one of us is susceptible to falling away from him through neglect of the gifts of grace he gives us through the ministry of his Church. None of us is properly aware of just how weak and dependent we are on him and his saving Word to give us life and make us fruitful for God's kingdom. We don't see how needful it is to hear his Word by which he makes us clean. If we did, we'd pursue it more diligently. As it is, far too many who begin the Christian life fail to finish it. Like the Children of Israel who left Egypt with Moses, many don't make it to the Promised Land. We need to be on guard, therefore, and recognize that the threats we face from without and within are very real and very deadly.

And today's Epistle raises yet another threat. St. John warns us that many false prophets have gone out into the world. It was true already in his day, and things have only gotten worse since. The result is that a lot of what calls itself true Christianity, isn't. Oh, they use right sounding words. They present the appearance of godliness and spiritual truth. They teach from the Bible and expound upon its passages. But they misapply it. They talk about the Christian and what you must do, rather than about Christ and what he did. They talk about God's love for and acceptance of sinners, but they leave out repentance and Jesus and his cross. There are any number of ways to distort the truth; but they all end up offering a counterfeit Gospel, which is no Gospel at all. They don't connect you to Christ and him crucified nor do they keep you abiding in him.

This is why John tells us to not believe every spirit, but to test them to see whether they are from God. How do we do that? By comparing what they are saying in the name of God to the Word of God. And the only way to do that is to be thoroughly grounded in and continuously exposed to God's Word and its correct exposition. Bank tellers learn to detect counterfeit bills by continuously handling the real thing. If one doesn't feel right, it's probably because it isn't. Likewise, using the Good Shepherd imagery from last week, sheep learn to recognize their true shepherd's voice by constantly hearing him speak. Thus they can't be fooled by someone who attempts to imitate their shepherd. In the same way, we learn to detect the soul-destroying teaching of false prophets by steady exposure to Christ's true teaching – which in turn speaks of the necessity of remaining active in a sound biblical church where the Word of God is rightly divided. And that too is part of your abiding in Christ and him in you.

This is what the Lord desires for you: that you abide Christ and continue to do so for your entire lifetime, because then through you his Holy Spirit will produce much fruit unto God the Father's glory, and you will prove yourself to be Christ's true disciple. May this, God's good and gracious will for his vineyard, be accomplished in us now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!