

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 29, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Bear fruit for the Father
—John 15:1-8

“I am,” Jesus said, “the bread of life...the light of the world...the gate for the sheep...the good shepherd...the resurrection and the life...the way and the truth and the life.” All these “I am” statements of Jesus emphasize it is by grace that we are saved, through faith in Jesus. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” “I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters through me will be saved.” “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.” “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” All these “I am” statements of Jesus are in the gospel of John, chapters 6, 8, 10, 11, 14.

There is one more “I am” statement of Jesus in John chapter 15. It’s the last one, and it stands apart from all the other ones because this final “I am” statement of Jesus emphasizes living as Christians, that we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. “*I am the vine*,” Jesus says.

Actually there are two “*I am the vine*” statements here. Both express a relationship, a connection. Let’s take the first one, a connection between Jesus and his Father. “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.*” “*I am the true vine*”: Jesus is the only way to be saved, the only way to God the Father; likewise, he is the only way for anyone to produce fruit for the Father. “*My Father is the gardener.*” The vinedresser, the one who manages the vineyard, takes care of the vines and their branches, and watches for the grapes. In that work God the Father is industrious, always active. As he inspects the branches on the vine, if he sees a branch that isn’t producing anything, he removes it, severs it completely from the vine. It’s already a dead branch. Get rid of it. If he sees a branch that is producing, he prunes it. It’s a living branch. He clears and cuts it back so there can be fresh growth and even more fruit the next time around. It makes you wonder. Which one am I? As the Father inspects me, is he seeing a dead branch that must be removed? Or is he seeing a productive branch in need of care and pruning?

As Jesus spoke these words in the upper room the night before his death, I suppose the disciples may have been asking themselves the same question. But by this time Judas the betrayer had already left the room, so Jesus assured the rest: “*You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*” Jesus’ words had produced Christian faith within them. He told them, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.” Jesus’ words have produced Christian faith within us too. By his grace he chose us and appointed us to go and bear fruit.

So we can expect to be pruned. We can and should expect the Father to take out his snip, his shears, his lopper, and his saw and do some cutting in our life. Inevitably for us that will bring some frustration, some disappointment, some pain. He will clip off some arrogance, even a silent, internal arrogance of ours and bring us a lesson in humility. He will cut off impatience, which is often a form of selfishness, and bring us a lesson in patience and endurance. He will lop off inflated self-confidence on our part and bring us a lesson in trusting him. He may sever material blessings, remove tangible items from out of our hands and from over our heads and remind us that the kind of worship he is really looking for is worship in spirit and in truth. And yes, he is willing to saw off every self-serving ambition in our hearts and replace it with love, because love, after all, is *the* fruit he is looking for. There may be drastic cuts in our life, the way a hatchet reduces a plant all the way back to its roots. Severe loss. A health crisis. A brush with death. The Father can prune in those ways too. But it’s all good. It’s okay. The Father loves you. He loves you just as he loves his own eternal Son Jesus. And you know the Father’s intent. Jesus tells you what the Father’s intent is: that you bear even more fruit than did before.

Let’s take the second “*I am the vine*” statement of Jesus. A connection between Jesus and you. “*I am the vine; you are the branches.*” In explaining what this means, Jesus says some negative, exclusionary things. Listen. “*No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*” “*Apart from me you can do nothing.*” “*If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*” Sometimes we think we can go it alone. We think we can be more productive with less of God’s Word in our life. We tell ourselves that time is better spent elsewhere in other activities. Who has time for reading, listening, and recalling the written words of God? So we devote all our time to our pursuits. That approach may even seem productive for a while. We get a lot done. We may get praise from others for our dedication and our work ethic. Maybe we earn scholarships, awards, promotions, higher pay. But I hope you realize there can be a huge difference between all that success and truly

bearing fruit in Jesus for the glory of the Father. They are not necessarily the same thing. “Nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” is what the apostle Paul said of himself. “*You cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me...Apart from me you can do nothing*” is what Jesus says to us.

So remain in Jesus, as he commands. “*Remain in me, and I will remain in you.*” As you and I remain branches connected to Jesus, the true vine, as his words remain in us and we remain in him, now we are talking productivity. Now we are talking fruitfulness as measured not by human standards, but by God. We have an assurance from Jesus about our fruitfulness and productivity. More than just a pea-sized grape here and a couple scrawny-looking grapes over there. Much more. “*If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.*” Clusters and clusters of juicy, plump grapes. Jesus’ picture is easy to understand. Anyone who has ever visited a vineyard or a been in a fruit and vegetable garden, anyone who has seen clusters of grapes in the store, anyone who has picked juicy grapes off the branch and popped them into the mouth gets it. It’s simple. If you are not connected to Jesus, no fruit. If no fruit, then you know the final result: thrown out, dried up, burned. If you are connected to Jesus, much fruit. If much fruit, then a blessed result: the Father, who loves you and sent his Son to save you, is glorified.

Not all of our fruit is going to look exactly the same. I have responsibilities different from yours. You have opportunities different from mine. One Christian has different life circumstances from the other Christian. This Christian is placed by God into this time and place, and that Christian is placed by God into that time and place. And there is a time for everything. But generally speaking, you know what those juicy, plump grapes are going to look like in our lives? They are going to show up as obedience to God’s commands.

Love your God with all your heart. Honor his name. Learn and respect his Word. Respect all authority too, starting at home with your father and your mother, and branching out to your pastors and your teachers, and to your government. Care about other people and their personal well-being. Care about their marriages, while taking care of your own wife or husband if God has graciously given you a marriage of your own. Care about other people’s property, do what you can to help them secure and enjoy the possessions God has given to them. Care about other people’s reputations, speak the things in love that will benefit and build others up. And be content with whatever God has seen fit to give you without wishing you had what everybody else has. This is all fruit for the Father, who gave us his Son and connected us to his Son like a branch to the vine.

There’s a final fruit specifically mentioned by Jesus, and we want to talk about this for a bit. It’s prayer. Sometimes, probably more times than we realize, it would be best for us just to stop, put everything down, leave everything off, let the car stayed parked in the garage, and concentrate our time and attention to prayer. Praying itself is a fruit of faith in Jesus—a plump, juicy grape. Sometimes we can do more by bold asking than by the frantic, stressed-out bustle we tangle ourselves up in.

Here’s how some seventh graders recently described prayer. Before we started our study of the Lord’s Prayer, I had them anonymously write down their thoughts on what prayer is and why they pray.

“Prayer is communication with God and when you need help you pray, when you’re happy you pray. I pray because God’s always there to listen...We pray because we trust that God will hear our prayers and will do everything for our good...Prayer is a blessing! We know that if we pray, God will always hear us. Whenever we’re down, angry, or joyful, we always know that there is always someone who is ready to listen (God). If I feel like I need a pair of ears listening to me, I always pray to God...I pray before bed asking God to keep me safe while I sleep. I pray before I eat and I also prayed for 5 more minutes with my grandpa before he passed away.”

I guess these students must have been listening to Jesus: “*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*”

I want you to think about one last thing this morning with regard to prayer. How do you end the day in prayer? What do you pray about before you close your eyes and sleep? There are probably prayers there for your loved ones near and far. Prayers for God’s help in the matters that weigh on your mind. Thanks to God for his daily blessings. Looking back at the day, no doubt there are prayers for God’s forgiveness for your failures, your sins. And all those things are right and good to pray. And there is something else to add. We should not live under the illusion that we just can’t do anything good, that everything we do is evil. Now it’s true that nothing good lives in the sinful nature. And it’s most certainly true that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, and this not of ourselves, not by works. But it’s also true that we are now God’s project. We are connected to Jesus the vine, and in him we are bearing fruit in our life. It’s really happening. Jesus’ promise is coming true every day: “*If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.*” So may I suggest closing your day with a prayer of thanks to God? Thank you for the fruit you are producing in my Christian life, Lord Jesus. Thank you, dear Father, for making me productive to bear fruit for you today. That itself is a fruit, a recognition of what God is doing. Keep that in mind, along with the words of Jesus, “*I am the vine, you are the branches,*” and see if you don’t bear even more fruit in Jesus tomorrow. More juicy, plump grapes for the Father. Amen.