

Stay Connected to the Vine!

Two weeks ago, Barbara Bush’s funeral was making all the headlines. One of the articles that was published was about her relationship with her husband. In particular, the article shared one of the many love letters George wrote to his then fiancée Barbara while he was serving overseas in World War II.

It’s a touching letter – you can look for it online when you get home today. But it brought to mind a truth: When we love someone, we want to stay connected to them. That’s why soldiers far from loved ones wrote letters back home. It’s why husband and wife will set aside some quality time each week to talk. It’s why we follow our friends’ Facebook feeds and have skype sessions with family who live in other states. We don’t want to drift apart from the people we love. We want to stay connected to them.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus uses the picture of vine and branches to remind us that there is a connection infinitely more important than our earthly relationships: Our connection to him. It’s the night before Jesus died...the night before he showed his disciples that there is no one in the world who could love them – and you – more than he does. And because he loves you, he wants you to stay connected to him. He says it eight times in eight verses – “Remain in me!” – so that you know how important it is. Listen as your Savior says, “Stay connected to the Vine!” Because 1) He gives you life, and 2) he makes you fruitful.

**I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, and I will 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.**

**<sup>5</sup> “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.**

*1. He gives you life*

It’s a beautiful picture Jesus uses to describe an even more beautiful spiritual reality. We might be more familiar with fruit trees than grapevines, but the point is the same: In either, sap flows from the trunk to the branches, keeping them alive and enabling them to produce fruit. So it is with you and Jesus. When God brought you to faith, he connected you to Jesus. Like a life-giving sap, the blessings Jesus died to win you – forgiveness, salvation, life with God now and forever – began to flow from him to you. Making you alive spiritually. Producing fruit in your life – good works – attitudes and actions that are pleasing to God.

We sometimes use Jesus’ picture in catechism class to teach the role of good works in the Christian’s life. Good works aren’t the cause of our salvation one bit; that would be as backwards

as saying the fruit is what gives life to the branches! No, the vine gives life to the branches, and the natural result is they bear fruit. Jesus is the only cause of our salvation, and the result is that we produce good works.

But Jesus main point in using the picture is to stress the importance of staying connected to him. It doesn't take a gardening expert to know what happens when a branch loses its connection to the trunk, but Jesus spells it out for us anyways: **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.** Note well what Jesus is describing. Not people who never believed in him, but people who once did; branches who at one point were connected to the vine, alive in him, producing fruit; branches who ultimately lost their connection to Jesus. How does it happen? Well, Jesus tells us in these verses how he *keeps* us connected to him. **If you remain in me and my words remain in you...** The word that brought us to faith and connected us to Jesus keeps us in the faith, connected Jesus. Stay away from his word and your connection weakens. Stay away from his word enough, and you lose it entirely. The sap stops flowing. You wither and die spiritually. And there's nothing left for dead dry branches but to be thrown into the fire.

You see why we need the warning, don't you? Because it can happen so easily that we neglect our connection to Jesus. Take it for granted: We're connected now, so we always will be. And then staying connected to Jesus by staying in his word stops being the most important concern in my life and for my loved ones. A good thing, but not the most important thing. And then it starts to take a back seat to all those other connections we keep in our life – to our jobs, to sports activities, to our relaxation. Personal devotions get cut. Then bible study at church. Then Sunday worship becomes optional...

Friends, Jesus loves us enough to warn us where this neglect of his word leads: Dried and withered branches thrown into the fire. But his love has done so much more for you than just warn you about that fate; his love has saved you from that fate. The day after he spoke these words, Jesus carried our neglect of his word and all our other sins to the cross. There he dried and withered as he suffered the death we deserved for them. There he suffered the fires of hell in our place as he took our sins away. He did it all so that he could rise and become for you the Vine - so that he could connect you to himself – you in him, and he in you.

Through your connection to him, you are forgiven. Did you notice what he said to those disciples that night? **You are already clean because of the word spoken to you.** He says the same to you this morning. Through your connection to him, you have life with God that lasts forever.

"Remain in me," Jesus says. Eight times in eight verses he says it because he loves you that much, because he wants nothing to separate him from you. Stay in Jesus by staying in his word, because he gives you life.

## *II. He makes you fruitful*

But also because he wants to make you more fruitful. You see, God is an aggressive gardener. He sees the fruits of faith Jesus is producing in your life, and he's pleased with them! The fact that you're here, worshipping him, is a fruit of faith that pleases him. That you support this ministry with your time and offerings, is a fruit of faith that pleases him. That you care about each other and share with each other and love one another – fruits of faith that please him.

He looks at the fruits you're producing, and he's pleased...but he's not content. He wants more. Did you hear Jesus say that? **My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit – that's you and me – he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.** God wants you to be more fruitful still.

And that can make us uncomfortable at first. Because there's a part of us that is content with the fruits we're producing. Doesn't want to become more fruitful, because well, it's painful. Involves pruning, after all – God cutting out of our lives sinful attitudes or habits we've grown comfortable with. Growing involves a striving and struggle to change – and part of us is too lazy to want that. Would keep the Gardener at a distance, says, "I'm okay with where I'm at spiritually, and you should be, too."

But then we're forgetting why the Gardener wants to make us more fruitful. It's because he loves us. You see, any ordinary grape-farmer, what's his primary concern? Getting grapes! But God is no ordinary gardener. His primary concern isn't the fruits we produce for him – he needs nothing from us. His primary concern is the branches. You. He wants you to be more fruitful because it's truly what's best for you. Because it's a life more like the one he created us to have. Because it's a life filled with more joy, peace, and blessings for you and those around you.

And here's the beautiful part: The fruitfulness he wants from you, he gives to you. Did you hear Jesus' promise? **If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.** He's the vine; we're the branches. The branches job is just to receive; the Vine's job is to give. "Remain in me," Jesus says, "and the Father and I will give you everything you'll need to become more fruitful."

The Father will prune you. He's already been doing that this morning, hasn't he? With his word, cutting away at the fruitless parts of your life. Cutting away that attitude that says God's Word is optional. Cutting away that part of us that believes that lie that we're okay we're at spiritually.

What else would he cut away out of love for you? Maybe it's the self-centeredness that's keeping you from being the spouse that you ought. Maybe it's the anger that's keeping you from forgiving the person whose wronged you. Maybe it's the worry that keeps you from... whatever it is, the Gardener will keep working through his word, pruning you.

And then he'll sit back and let the Vine go to work. The Vine is Jesus Christ, who through the Word and his Supper pours into you God's grace and mercy and his forgiveness. Who assures you that you are clean, that you belong to him, and nothing can snatch you from him. Fills you with the life-giving sap of his love and grows you, giving you all you need to live a more fruitful life. Producing more of the fruits that delight him and the Father and bring joy and peace to your life, too.

God grant it for all of us, as we stay connected to the vine! Amen.