

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Acts 8:26-40 1 John 4:7-21 John 15:1-8
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
May 2, 2021 (Traditional)

When I was younger, I think I had this vision that someday, I was going to achieve complete self-sufficiency. At some point I was going to have all the knowledge, skills and wisdom I needed. All of my relationships and my work would fall into place and I would reach this state of fulfillment and maturity and self-containment, where I would no longer need help from anyone.

Well now I've pretty much completely given up on that vision—it's been shattered by reality so many times. I'm seeing more and more how much I need people. I depend on people. I need help. I need love. Without shame I can admit I need people to recognize and affirm me. We all need this. And also, the more I delve into God's Word and learn about his ways, and the world, and life, the more I know how little I know. The truth is, I'll never have **all** the skills or wisdom I need, to be the husband, the father, the pastor or citizen I know I should be. None of my relationships and none of my work will ever fall quite into that perfect groove, and there will never be a day this side of heaven where I can call myself completely fulfilled, mature or self-contained. I need continual help. Even though I know that I am fully responsible for my life, my life will never be my own possession.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells us outright that we're branches on a vine. We're not, in ourselves, the whole tree. We'll never be self-contained. We are unfinished—works in progress—and we'll never be able to complete ourselves. We depend on living relationships. We need to be fed from the vine, and our purpose in life is not to be self-contained, but simply to produce fruit for other people.

In the gospel, Jesus confirms it: "I am the vine," he says, "and you are the branches." As believers, you and I have this beautiful gift of *knowing the root of all life*, and being connected to him. The Son—the second person of the Trinity—is the vine who carries life to the whole world. The world was created through him and is connected to God through him. And here's the awesome gift: he has become a person named Jesus, whom you and I can know and love and trust. So what does it look like in everyday terms, to be rooted in Jesus, the vine?

Well for one thing, it's to understand that we can't go solo as believers. These days it's become pretty common to hear people say: "I'm spiritual but not religious," which is a way of saying "I'm Christian but I'm not really interested in being connected to any part of Body of Christ, the Church." There was a time in my life—mainly through my undergrad years—when I thought I did not need to be attached in any real way to other believers—in order to be a Christian. I used to think that if I were just a good person, and if I tried to put God first in everything I did, then my connection with Christ the root of my life would be strong. But what I learned instead was that that was just another way of

trying to be self-contained. That was just another way of trying to have a relationship with God on my terms. And you know what usually happens when we try to have that relationship on our terms—when we try to be self-contained: God in his love for us has a way of smashing down the door to get to us. The door we closed on him. We experience God as a bulldozer, not because he's a bulldozer by nature, but because we stand in the way of his goodness and his will for us. And standing in Jesus Christ, I can look back and thank God for all the times he's knocked me down. Or to use Jesus' analogy of the vine and branches in today's gospel: I thank God for all the times he's pruned me.

A relationship with God is in many ways—not all ways but many ways—like a person's relationship with their spouse. You don't just carry your spouse around in your mind as an idea. We need to express our love for each other through everyday actions and words. Sometimes your spouse needs to build you up or, maybe, knock you down a little bit for your own good. You didn't marry an idea, you married a living person. And you can't control even half of what goes on that relationship--not if your relationship is alive and healthy. It's a two way street, a conversation, a back-and-forth between two different people. In that regard, why do we think our relationship with God is going to be any different? If the relationship is alive, isn't it going to be about a conversation, a two way street, back and forth? He didn't build us with a special antennae to communicate with him. He built us with ears and eyes and tongues and our five senses and tongues to speak with. Those are the means by which other people engage in a relationship with us. And that's how God is going to engage in a relationship with us, too. Furthermore, **we** are the branches God is putting out to connect with other people.

A couple of weeks ago we were talking about the resurrection of the body—literally the physical resurrection of Jesus, and how now, we (the Church) have become the physical agents of his resurrection power. The Holy Spirit works through us right here. Jesus gives himself to us, he attaches himself to us through people and events. Think of how Jesus initiated his relationship with you. Probably through your family, right? It's like we first come to hear him, see him, experience him, through the church. That's how the vine first attaches himself to us. His branches connect with us first. We love him because he first loved us, says John. It's not like we were out there looking for him. He found us. When he died on the cross, it was like he attached himself to all us dead branches, so he could lift us up to a new life. And that's not a truth that we are going to find on our own. That had to be brought to us, given to us, proclaimed to us. And God used other people to reach us.

It's like: forgiveness is a beautiful idea, but I need more than the idea. I need to hear God speak forgiveness to me today openly for my sins. I need to receive his body and blood as nourishment. I'm experiencing these realities with you all right here; the body of Christ. Tell me where else in the world today are we going to hear this good news...where is it going to break into our lives...except among God's gathered people?

Have you noticed how we Christians are saying so many things that go directly against today's culture? We're just saying what God has always said. For example: you must lose your life in order to find it; you *are* your brother's keeper; you *are* connected with

everyone. You are no better a human being than the person you judge. It's not your job to pronounce final judgment: God is the Center. Jesus Christ is Lord and King. Without him human beings are lost and dead. In him, we find our lives. And listen to our gospel today: we are just branches, we don't have roots of our own; we cannot live for ourselves; we have to be receivers first; we will always need help; we're built to produce fruit freely and joyfully. Jesus caps it off in today's lesson by saying "you can do nothing without me." It's all so humbling. And in a world where people think there are human solutions to every problem, we believers are only going to be seen as more and more countercultural.

So be it! What a beautiful promise we've been given: Through the cross and death of Jesus, the true Vine, God has transplanted us dead branches, into a new relationship with him based on his love and forgiveness, and it's a relationship that will never end. It's a life of gratitude and confidence. It's life in the Spirit.

So when Jesus says "you can do nothing without me," we say *thank God!* Because he has attached his life to ours. He is pouring his life into us. And we're going to show this new life to the world out there. If we know that he is the beginning and the end, then we can trust that he will finish everything about us that needs to be finished. So today we can stop worrying about being finished in ourselves. We can leave that to him, and produce the fruit today, that we're built to produce. We can give our love away fearlessly, knowing that nothing—not even death—can separate us from the true vine.