

# Third Sunday of Easter: John 10:11–18

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Preached for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

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Jesus the vine; we the branches. He the source of life, we the ones who live in Him. The image takes us out to wine country, to the rolling vineyards lush with grape vines. Fruitful branches thick with grapes growing on an old, gnarled vine with roots that reach deep into the ground. Jesus is that true vine, the only vine planted by God. His roots go deep down into Israelite soil and God's covenant promise to David, to Isarel, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all the way back to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, the place our origin.

The Father, Jesus says, is the vinedresser, the gardner. The guy with dirt under his fingernails and pruner's clippers on his belt. Watch the vinedresser in action. Watch how he cuts off every branch that doesn't bear fruit, while every branch that does he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. These aren't random, hacking cuts he's making. These are selective, strategic cuts, precisely just above a tender bud. He carefully distinguishes green wood from dead wood. He has but one purpose: To make the branch even more fruitful.

Look at an unpruned vine sometime, one that hasn't seen the pruner for several years. On the surface there is a lot of lush green growth, but deep inside it's mostly dead wood. And there's very little fruit on such a vine. Fruit happens on new growth, on buds that have been spurred into action by careful pruning. That's the first point of this analogy this morning. The Father prunes us for fruitfulness.

Before we can understand this image fully, Iwe need to understand precisely what the "fruit" is that Jesus is talking about. I'm going to invoke the general editorship of the Holy Spirit here, and suggest that "fruit" generally means the same thing, no matter who says it, whether Jesus, John, or Paul. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that the "fruit of the Spirit" at work in us through the Word is this: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It's a singular fruit, not multiple fruits. This is the fruit I think Jesus is referring to when He talks about His disciples being fruitful branches joined to Him.

“Being fruitful” isn’t about how much work you can do for Jesus or how many disciples you can notch for the kingdom. Jesus isn’t giving His disciples a punch list of things to do. He’s telling them what flows from a heart that trusts Him, that clings to His death for life, that believes His Word: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Fruit happens more or less automatically when the branch is healthy and properly pruned. I have a grape vine growing in my backyard that produces a lot of fruit without a lot of effort. It seems to come more or less automatically. I can’t imagine a branch agonizing over its fruit production, or trying to squeeze out fruit from a dead branch. If the vine is alive, and the life of the vine is flowing out to the branching, fruit happens. It happens so much that you have to thin out the fruit too.

Now if anything impedes the flow of juices from the main vine to a branch, the branch will wither and die and become fruitless dead wood. Dead wood is what the Father’s pruning clippers are after. Going back to Galatians, we might say that the dead wood is our own sinful self which gets in the way of Jesus having His way with us. Paul calls these things the “works of the flesh,” and give us some examples, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, adultery, immoral living, idolatry, witchcraft or sorcery, fighting, arguing, jealousy, anger, selfishness, divisions and the spirit of division, envy, drunkenness, carousing, that sort of thing.

These are the things that Jesus died to take away from us. These are the things we died to in our Baptism. This is what Jesus absorbed into His death and buried in His tomb. These are the dead works of unbelief, of the death of Adam at work in us and in the world around us. “In Adam we die.” These things need to be cut away and burned up. And so the Father prunes away the dead wood, whatever gets in the way of Jesus life flowing through us.

Pruning can be painful. The branch suffers loss and injury. When I prune that grape vine in winter, it’s not a pretty sight. When I’m done, all that’s left are a few short stubs with a couple of buds on each of them. But that’s where the growth comes that makes fruit.

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” we ask. Why do bad things happen to me? Why does God permit tragedy to occur? Why does He let people lose house and home and job and honor? The answer from today’s reading comes this way: He prunes every branch in Jesus that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You’re being pruned, not punished. Pruned by the Master Gardener to produce greater

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control that you could ever imagine.

And that is the experience of many Christians. It isn't until they experience suffering and loss, until they've done some "Job time," that they discover a depth of love, joy, peace that would have remained hidden. Two weeks ago, a series of tornados ripped through a small town in Missouri and completely devastated the town, including a large church. There was a picture in the paper last week of the congregation worshipping outdoors, in front of the rubble of their church. They set up hundreds of folding chairs set up in front of a large, makeshift altar. They were caring for each other instead of for a building. The tornado had pruned away their property, but a whirlwind can't take Jesus away, or His Spirit.

You've seen it yourself, or maybe even experienced it for yourself. Someone who is basically a wallflower Christian, barely recognizable, distracted maybe, suffers some loss – loss of health, or work, or property. And there's great grief and sorrow. But instead of shaking your fist at God, or cutting Him off, you turn to Him in your misery. You embrace the loss and accept it. You turn to the Word. You commune more intentionally. You come to confession. And you find that the most difficult and painful times in your life are also the most fruitful, spiritually speaking. There's room for the implanted Word to grow and blossom. And you find a joy and a peace and a softening of the heart that you can have no other way.

No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain joined to the vine. Apart from the vine, it will wither, dry up, and die. "Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me....apart from me, you can do nothing." That's the second point. This is not about you, but about Christ at work in you and you living in Christ.

Last week, I was cleaning up a patch of olalliberries in my backyard. Olaliberries are a big, dark, juicy berry. Great on cereal. Mine grow on a long vine tied to the wall. Olaliberries have this nasty habit of rooting wherever they touch the ground making them almost a weed. I hadn't done much pruning on them last year, and so many stems had touched the ground and rooted, setting up new clusters of plants. As I was pruning and untangling things, I accidentally cut a long branch at both ends. Here was this perfect branch, with flowers and fruit on it, cut off at both ends from its source of life. I noticed my mistake within about ten minutes, as the leaves began to wilt in the morning sun.

Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. And yet we try. We who ought to know better, we baptized believers in Jesus, yet we try to go it alone. I don't know whether it's our rugged individualism or our old Adam. I suspect it's some of both. We try to have the Spirit's fruit without Jesus. The unbelieving world certainly does. It has all sorts of programs and religions that promise peace and joy and fulfillment, but can't deliver, because it's all up to you in the end. "The energy for change is all inside you," they say. "You just have to tap into it." But when you try to tap into it, you find the well to be dry. The truth is there is no diet, no mantra, no exercise that will make you fruitful in the way we are talking about. There is no twelve step program to give you love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These things don't naturally flow from our hearts. What comes naturally are lies and theft and slander and gossip and immorality and murder and threats. Not the fruit of the Spirit but the sin of Adam.

Good fruit comes from Jesus, out of His perfect, sinless life. Out of His innocent suffering and death. Out of the open, empty tomb of His resurrection. It comes from the life of Jesus flowing into each of you, joined to Jesus. He is the Vine, remember. We are the branches. We are not each vines unto ourselves. We are branches joined to the Vine, drawing our life from Him, our strength, our fruitfulness.

Grafted into Him, hanging on to Him in faith, we bear much fruit. Our lives are filled with love, with joy, with patience, with kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and selfcontrol. That's what Jesus does in us with His Word. Remaining in Him, we hear His Word, we eat and drink His Body and Blood, we hear and cling to His Word of forgiveness. What happens here in the congregation each Sunday morning is "vine and branches stuff." Jesus the Vine, feeding and nourishing and refreshing the branches to be fruitful.

When we cut ourselves off from the Vine, when we refuse to hear or don't make the time to read His Word, when we stay away from the sacrament of His Body and Blood, when we refuse the gifts Christ sets before us, why are we then surprised when we feel dried up, withered, fruitless?

Sometimes we barely notice it in our day to day habits. We just kind of slip away, lose touch. We're not at the Lord's Table as often, we don't read the Bible as much, we go through the motions of religion but we're not hearing. And what happens? We dry up. Faith withers, like that Olaliberry branch cut off from its source of life. We live small, puny, trouble, discontented, empty lives. And it's all so unnecessary.

God has done everything – embraced us in the death of His Son, baptized us, forgiven us, welcomed us to His table. He grafts us to the true Vine and prunes the unproductive branches. So don't blame God if you're all dried out and fruitless. It's not God's fault, it's our own fault. The Vine is always there, giving us life. We're the ones who cut ourselves off and say no. But Jesus is always faithful, always forgiving, always urging and welcoming. "Come to me. I am the Vine, you are my branches. I will fill you with my life, with my strength, with my forgiveness. Apart from me there is only death and destruction. And the hell of it is that it's all unnecessary. I died for you. I embrace you in my death. I remain in you, now you remain in me. That's where you're fruitful and alive – in me. Not in yourself, but in me." Jesus is saying that to each of us here this morning. Remain in me, as I remain in you.

By His Word Jesus remains in us, and by faith that Word we remain in Him. His Word makes us clean, His Word makes us fruitful, His Word shapes our words of prayer. First we hear, then we speak. That's the order. The Vine comes first, then the Branches. Jesus says, "If my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." That doesn't give us some magic formula to get whatever we wish. This is no *carte blanche* guarantee for prayer. Instead, Jesus is saying that when His word has had its way with us, when it has gone into our hearts and struck our minds and our hearts so that we trust Him, His Word will shape every word that comes out of our mouths.

Jesus wants each of us, all of you, to be fruitful, to live large in His life, to live freely in His forgiveness. He desires that for each of you. It's to His Father's glory that you bear fruit, much fruit, that your lives be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and that you be His disciples, trusting Him all the way in life, in death. You are the branches; He is the Vine. In Him you are fruitful.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

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#### SOURCE

*Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "John 10:11-18 (5 Easter B)", posted 2003-05-18 (<https://htlcms.org/2003/05/john-1011-18-5-easter-b/>).*