**John 15:1-8 (ESV)**

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. **2**  Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. **3** Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. **4**  Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. **5** I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. **6** If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **7** If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8**  By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

**“Forgiveness Bears Fruit”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. The fruitfulness in farming today has come from one common source. Fuel is no less important for the fields than it is for the rest of society. In the same way, as we celebrate the Easter Season, the source of life for anyone to be a Christian has come by the Gospel. The Church, as much as it appears to be an institution in the hands of men, is truly the creation and fruitfulness from the hands of God. Jesus told the disciples on the night of His betrayal, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is fully committed to caring for the baptized. The source of this “hands on activity” rests on Jesus in whom the Father sent and by whom the Spirit rejoices. From His death and resurrection, forgiveness won by the promised Savior is what runs the whole vineyard. Luther described the Triune God’s work in the His Church around Word and Sacrament saying, “For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” You cannot have life or salvation without the forgiveness God wants to give by the Gospel. In other words, the baptized belong to a very special vineyard. Spiritual life comes through the crucified and risen Savior. Forgiveness is the source for all fruitfulness.

Only Jesus is the true vine of forgiveness that brings forth the branches. Israel in the Old Testament was a vineyard established by the hands of God. However, they looked to their works as the source of salvation. It lead the prophet Isaiah to say, “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!” (Isaiah 5:7) Likewise, on the night of His betrayal, Jesus revealed where comfort for the disciples would be. He said, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” Forgiveness of sins is what Jesus gave them. The horror of the cross, the darkness of sinful humanity, and the failure of works had no comfort or victory. Yet, the word remained true for them, “You are clean.”

Christian do not become Christians by producing fruit. If that were the case, then we could just ignore the Word of forgiveness. However, what the various branches of the baptized share in common comes from only one true vine. Jesus justifies, makes clean, and excuses away everything by what He gives for all as the Sacrifice. St. John said, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” The righteousness of Christ is what He gives to make us rightly His branches because it rests on Him as Savior. It is this connectedness to the Gospel with God dying for sinners that made the Ethopian Eunuch declare, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Cleanness does not come from the fruit because God makes clean the branches in the one true vine sent for sinners.

Where Jesus as the vine is faithful to the branches, there we also find the vinedresser. Only the Father in heaven knows how to make the branches bear more fruit. It is to go back to the forgiveness given by His Son. The consequences of not abiding in Jesus are death, separation, and eternal judgment. There is a warning to all who imagine the Father does not see unfruitful branches. Judas was a branch that God broke off apart from the disciples. He wanted nothing to do with the one true vine. St. James the Apostles also tells us, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). The spiritually dead are useless and have no lasting place on the vine. No fruit is finally a deeper sickness. No need of forgives from the Savior. Yet, only His Word gives life to the baptized.

At the same time, the Father as the vinedresser is not careless with the branches that do bear fruit. He cuts them as well. Pruning has the purpose of removing deadwood, shaping, maintaining health, reducing risk, and for a better quality or yield of fruit. All this is in the hands of the Father and His Will, which is always good. A person might look at a trimmed plant and say, “You killed it.” The judgment is wrong, because they are not the one caring for the plant. The Father watches over the baptized with a life of forgiveness in His Son. He allows suffering or disappointments to drive us back to Jesus. Fruitfulness does not draw strength from successful fruit but from the saving vine. Pruning requires ears to hear Jesus faithfully say, “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Where there is the true vine and care by the vinedresser, all fruit ends up as praise to God the giver of the vineyard. Only the Spirit uses the branches to glorify the Father and the Son. Jesus reveals what kind of fruit springs forth saying, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” What is it that we wish? It is that Word the disciples were taught in the Lord’s Prayer hearing, “Thy will be done.” Just as what Jesus showed forth in His life in drops of blood saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:38). Where forgiveness is the source for all fruitfulness salvation goes far beyond whatever we could secure or wish for ourselves. St. Augustine declares, “But God forbid that such a thing should be given to us if we abide in Christ, who, when we ask, only does what will be for our advantage” (ACC).

The Spirit given in baptism turns life into a place of honor and praise to the Gospel. By Word and Sacrament, we receive the nourishment needed from Jesus as the branches. What springs forth in our life as a forgiven people is for others to face the God of salvation through us. “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” This is not for pride or personal satisfaction. Matter a fact, it may not all that impressive to most. The fruit comes from the same love God has glorified and proven in the Savior Jesus. St. John reminds us, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.” Forgiveness is the source for all fruitfulness. Whether in life or death, God’s eternal vineyard is our home. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.