

Pastor Joe Polzin
John 15:1-8
“The Fruitful Vine”
Year A – Stewardship Sunday
November 19, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today, this Stewardship Emphasis Sunday, which also coincides with Thanksgiving right around the corner, it seems entirely appropriate that our Gospel reading talks about food: *fruit* to be exact. Jesus says, “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” (John 15:5).

For me, this brought to mind some fun memories with my family this past summer. One of the activities we’ve really enjoyed, especially with the kids, is going fruit picking. We’ve found that there are some really good U-Pick farms in Northern Michigan. We already have our favorite spots for cherries, strawberries, blueberries, peaches, and of course, apples in the fall. The kids like running up and down the orchard rows, and trying to find the perfect spot.

Of course, going to pick your fruit is an interesting experience, if you really think about it. Because what you’re doing is paying the farm to go pick their fruit for them. On several occasions when we’ve been there, there have been workers out in the field at the same time as us, getting paid to pick the same fruit that we were. And I can’t help but think to myself, “Well, I’m on the wrong side of this deal.”

But in my time fruit-picking, what I’ve learned is that in order to ensure that you’re getting the best possible piece of fruit, there are some important things to keep in mind. To find good fruit, you actually don’t start by looking at the fruit. You look at the tree, or the plant, or the vine. A healthy source is needed in order to produce good fruit. Without a healthy vine, you can bet that no good fruit will ever come from it.

And so today, as we talk about bearing fruit in our lives, and living lives of good stewardship, we have to be careful never to put the cart before the horse, as they say. Before we even think of what it is we do as Christians, we always have to consider our source, the source of all things, God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. We consider the vine to which we are attached. And we hear from Jesus, apart from the vine, apart from our source of life and all good things, we could do nothing. Because of our sin, and our sinful nature, we couldn’t bear any fruit.

But Christ has spoken his Word of forgiveness to us. He says, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you” (15:3). What Word? It’s the Word He spoke in his life and ministry, the announcement of why he came, the work he did on our behalf. He spoke that Word when he proclaimed from the cross, “It is finished,” when he gave up his spirit, indicating that the entire debt for our sin had been paid off by his precious blood.

And we have been personally joined to the work of Jesus through his Word, with the waters of Baptism, washed over us, cleansing us in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He grafted us to the vine, to the tree of life. And his Word continually comes to us weekly in Scripture, and Sermon, when we hear Christ speak to us through His Word. His Word comes to us when Jesus, through a pastor’s absolution, announces our sins are truly forgiven. And when the Word, with the bread and wine, body and blood, is given to us for the forgiveness of our sins.

Lutherans make a big deal about the Word of Christ, because it’s not some vague concept or generalization that his love and forgiveness are just out there somewhere. The Word is

concrete. We can hear it. And feel it. See it. Even taste it on a regular basis. It's Jesus' promise to us that we are "clean," we are forgiven, by all that he's done for us. He says, "Abide in me" and "abide in my words" because as we abide in these words, in *the Word*, we continually abide in his never-ending forgiveness and life that's he's given to us.

This is our source. *This* is our vine, to whom we are connected. And we are connected to him in a very real way. That's why it's a shame any time we undervalue Christ's Word in any way, taking it for granted, or neglecting it in our lives. When we don't study it. Don't receive it. Don't come to church where we know his Word may be found. We may undervalue his Word even to the point where we mistrust it, and begin to rely on our own understanding. Where we begin to doubt the place where he's said his Word of forgiveness may be found.

And some even wander from this source of life, voluntarily cutting themselves off, thinking they'll be okay out there on their own. It's like fruit that thinks it will be fine without its source, without its vine, as so it cuts itself off the branch. But if we are cut off from Christ and his Word, we would surely wither and die.

Thanks be to God, He does not wait for us to join ourselves to the vine. He has come to us, to join us to His Son, Jesus Christ and His Word, in Baptism, and continues to nourish us through the continual delivery of His Word through His means of grace in our lives. And this source of life is perfect, and strong, and sufficient, and everything we could need.

And only after God has connected us to the pure, life-giving vine can we begin to talk about bearing fruit as Christians. We do not bear fruit on our own. We bear fruit because we are connected to him. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

So what does that look like? What do we do as Christians, ones who are connected to our Lord Jesus and his Word, in order to bear fruit? And simply put, a fruitful Christian is a good steward.

This past summer, if you were here for our series on stewardship in July, we talked about stewardship and what it means. And stewardship, or being a good steward, a good manager of our lives and resources, starts with the acknowledgment that everything we have, everything we've been given, comes from God. Our time, our resources, our money, our possessions, our talents, our passions, and even our very breath, *all this* has been given to us from God. And not because we deserve them or have earned them in any way, but because He has given us all things through Christ, out of His love for us and His grace.

Stewardship does not primarily mean the hours you spend at church, or what you place in the offering plate. That's like saying that the good works God has prepared for you can only happen here, which isn't true. Rather, stewardship is the entirety of your life that attends to how wisely you are using all that God has given you.

And here's the key for thinking about our lives as stewards. Your stewardship isn't for you. You've already been given everything you need through Christ, including your eternal salvation. You don't need to earn that in any way. And stewardship isn't even for God's sake. He doesn't need your faithful stewardship in order to accomplish His will. He's God, after all.

Stewardship is for the sake of our neighbor. The fruit that we bear in our lives is the fruit of love and service we show toward others. So, if you manage your finances well, however big or small they might be, you honor God by doing so, and you are able to competently provide for your family, yourself, and always looking to generously share what you can with others.

Same goes for our possessions and resources. We manage them well for the sake of our families and for the building up of others. And the same goes for our time. We keep a good schedule, not one that's too full, or one that's too relaxed, so we can give others our time, which is a very precious commodity, to serve others and show them we love them.

And of course, our concern as Christians is to love and serve our neighbor, because Christ first loved and served us. And by doing this, we are used by God to help grow His kingdom, to help grow that vineyard that is Christ's family. We connect ourselves and our families to the Word of Christ, teaching them, studying the Word, and coming regularly to church so we may continually receive it.

And we share that Word with our neighbor, telling them about the hope, and life, and strength we have in Jesus. We continue to abide in the life-giving Word of Christ, and we invite as many as possible to do the same.

Today, I'd like you to consider your life as a steward, as a manager, bearing fruit because we are connected to the fruitful vine of Jesus Christ. Consider your life first. How it is you connect with your God? Are you regularly partaking in His Word and Sacrament so you may be fed? Are you fostering a healthful relationship of repentance and a reception of His forgiveness by abiding in His Word?

Next, consider how you serve your family, extended family, and friends. Are you managing well the time you've been given, the finances you've been given, the possessions you've been given, and the skills and abilities you've been given to serve them, care for them, and to encourage them to be in God's Word.

And then, consider how you're a steward here at church. Like I said before, stewardship involves your whole life, not just what happens here at church. But to the extent of the ability that you've been given by God, church is a place God has called you to be a good steward. Church is a gift from God to you, it's the place He's designated for His Word to be regularly proclaimed and His Sacraments faithfully administered. If you need to know where to find God and His forgiveness, He's here. And equally as important, it's the place we know others need to be as well, as we pray to see more and more people here, connected to the Word of Jesus Christ.

So, I'll ask you to consider your stewardship here at church. Is this the place you just anticipate spending an hour each week? Or do you see this as the place where God works through His Word, and from where God works out in our community? I hope it's the latter. And in each our different ways, God asks each of us to support our church with our various time, talents, and treasure. We bear fruit in our lives, for the benefit of others, when we faithfully consider our own stewardship, and seek to grow in it.

This week, as you know is Thanksgiving. And as our nation gives thanks, we as Christians know two fantastic things. The best two things we can know. First, we know *to whom* we give thanks. We know our source of all things, our vine that gives us life and forgiveness. It's God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and by His Son, Jesus Christ. And second, we know for what we give thanks. We give thanks for all that Christ has accomplished for us. That all things come together in him, for our benefit and our salvation. As Christians, we abide in him and in his Word, for very fruitful lives, now and for eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.