

John 15:1-8

Before I go out to mow the lawn, I always walk through the yard and pick up branches. Sometimes there are only a few sticks to gather up. After a windstorm, it can take a wheelbarrow to do the job. I imagine that all of you do the same thing when you go out to mow. One thing we never do is to pick up a branch off the ground and attempt to reinsert it back into the tree. Even if we were to locate the exact place in the tree trunk where that branch once grew, we would not be able to put it back in there. Every branch that is laying on the ground we simply haul away.

Each and every one of us is a branch. Jesus says so in our text. We are branches growing out from the tree, or vine as He puts it in John 15. Branches do not create themselves. Every branch has its origin in the vine, or tree. And so with us. You and I don't just happen to be Christians by our own doing. Branches do not make the tree. Nor do they choose a tree, or make a decision to be part of a tree. The tree, or vine, makes the branches. Life flows, not from the branches to the tree, but from the tree to the branches.

You became a branch grafted into Christ in your baptism. You did not adopt Him; He adopted you as His child. He gave you life. You did not choose Him; He chose you and appointed you that you should bear much fruit (John 15:16).

That's what branches do--they bear fruit. If you have an apple tree or a peach tree, you look for fruit on its branches. That's what God looks for in us. He doesn't wonder if He will find fruits of faith in our lives; He expects to find them. He knows they will be there, because that's what branches do who are growing in Christ--we bear fruit.

Some branches bear a lot of fruit, other branches not as much. But every branch, because it receives its life from the tree, does bear fruit. We should not be envious of those Christians whose lives are overflowing with fruits of faith. We should rejoice, for we are all part of the same tree. You may not be able to travel into third-world nations and proclaim Christ to the people who live there. Those fruits are growing on another Christian's branch. But you can display on your branch the fruit of supporting such mission work with your money and your prayers. You may not have the fruit on your branch of teaching the Bible stories to young children. But you can display on your branch the fruit of bringing the little children to Sunday School and to church.

We are not all given the same abilities or the same opportunities, and so our fruits will vary. To some, God blesses with more earthly wealth, and He expects to find in abundance the fruit of giving on their branches. To others, God blesses with the gift of hospitality, and He looks for the fruit of caring and concern for others to be in abundance on their branches. To some, God blesses with the ability to work with their hands, and He expects the fruit of serving within the congregation as a trustee, or one who helps in this way, to be in abundance on their branches.

Not all Christians are organists, preachers, or choir members. But all Christians, because we are growing in Christ the vine, will bear fruits of faith in our lives. St. Paul lists these fruits in Galatians 6: "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control.*"

What about, however, where such fruits are lacking? Now we're talking about the branches we pick up from the ground before we mow. Not all branches are growing on the tree. Some are barely hanging on. Others have fallen to the ground. So what do we do--break them in two and burn them? It is not a fruit of faith to be judgmental. Rather, "*judge not lest you be judged,*" says Jesus. It is not for us as individuals to judge. God is the Judge. Listen to His Apostle Paul in Galatians. He is speaking to branches once growing on the tree, that now are lying on the ground: "*You are severed from Christ,*" he says, "*you who would be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace.*" These Galatians were sticks lying around waiting to be burned in the fire. They were no longer connected to the tree. They were cut off from God's grace in Christ.

This is what Satan tries to do with all of us--to sever us from Christ, the tree and the vine. And he has a lot of help. He uses the sinful world in which we live. Even our own sinful flesh is only too happy to help the devil in this. It begins in young Christians who are tempted to replace church on Sunday mornings with work and other activities. And Satan feeds them the line: "I don't need to go to church to be a Christian!" even though it is precisely here in worship, through Word and Sacrament, where we abide in Christ.

It continues after we become married and have children. We question the need of going up for the Sacrament all that often. We find less and less time to be in God's Word together. We listen to friends of other persuasions and question what we were taught in Catechism Class.

The devil knows full well that he is not going to cut us off from the tree in one fast swoop. It takes time. He whittles away at us day after day, week after week, year after year. He weakens our connection to the vine. The whole time our fruits are becoming more pale in color. They are not as abundant on our branch. We slow our giving to the church. Our attendance in the pew and at the Communion Table slows down as well. But Satan makes sure that we have good excuses for all these. He is devious. He does not want us to be aware that he is slowly severing us from the tree, from Christ.

We need to repent now while there is still time. Do not throw these words back at the preacher, or deflect them to your neighbor in the pew. Apply them to yourself, just as I must do to myself. We are all together part of the tree. When needed, we rebuke. But always we speak in love. And always we point to Christ to whom we are attached.

He attached Himself to the tree of the cross for you. Jesus was willing to die for you, for that is the only way He could be the source of life for you. He died and rose again to life, and the life He lives is as much for you as it is for Him. That's why He grafted you into Himself in your baptism. That's why He taught you, or is now teaching you, through the mouths of Christian parents, Sunday School, and Dayschool teachers. That's why He has called His preacher to stand here before you and deliver His forgiveness and salvation to you.

What would a tree be without branches bearing fruit? You, friend, no matter where you are on that tree; no matter how much, or how little fruit you are bearing--you are precious to your Lord. It's why He delights in giving you life from Himself. And it's why He delights in forgiving you. Yes, I know we have a lot of sin to forgive; we all do. Even the best-looking tree branches have rough spots and bird poop on them. Our lives are covered with such things. We bring them on ourselves. But Jesus keeps washing your heart and life with His cleansing blood. He forgives every sinful stain on your branch. He delights in you; not because you bear so much fruit, but because He made you His own child in baptism.

Whatever sin is in your life, it cannot sever you from the tree--not when you have a Savior who daily forgives your sins. The Galatians Paul addressed were severed from Christ not because of their sins against the Law, but because they had fallen away from the grace of Christ.

Satan will try to convince you that your sins have severed you from Christ; that you are a worthless branch lying on the ground, fit only to be thrown into the fire, and that there is no hope for you. Do not listen to that liar! There isn't one of you without hope. Jesus' word of forgiveness is for all of you. The life that connects you to the tree is here now for each one of you. It's the word of grace in your ears. It's the Word become flesh in bread and wine for you. This is how you abide in Christ: through His Word--His word of forgiveness and peace which He gives you right here and now. You are not worthless sticks. Your destiny is not to be tossed into the fire. You are--everyone of you is --a precious branch that bears fruit because you are in Christ, and He is in you. Amen.