

It is very late on a Thursday evening when Jesus speaks these words to His disciples. They have finished eating the Passover meal in the upper room. The disciples have received the Lord's Supper. He now leads them on the way toward the Garden of Gethsemane. As they walk along, He teaches them with the words of our text. And how very clear are these words. Judas, just before this, has left them. They would see, in Judas, the branch on the vine "*that does not bear fruit,*" and is taken away. And for the eleven disciples that remain on the vine, very soon the shears will come and they will endure much pain through the process of pruning.

It is impossible for them to avoid this pain and suffering. "*Every branch,*" says Jesus, "*Every branch of Mine*" will be confronted with the sharp tools of the vinedresser. The branch that does not bear fruit will face the cutting shears. The branch that does bear fruit will face the pruning shears.

As with the disciples, so with us. Your Heavenly Father will not let you alone. He will confront you with the tools of the vinedresser, for so He is. He has been doing this ever since you were grafted into the true vine, Jesus Christ, in your baptism. And He will not stop. No Christian is permitted to be a Christian in name only. There must be fruit if we are branches abiding in the vine. And there will be fruit because we are branches abiding in the vine. But there is always room on the branch for more fruit. And this is why, therefore, throughout our life we, who are in Christ, must face the pruning shears.

Now of course the branches on a tree or a vine cannot think or speak. But supposing they could, what would a branch say when it sees the vinedresser coming with his pruning shears? Panic and anxiety might set in. "Oh no!" it might cry, "Why do you come at me with those sharp teeth? You are going to hurt me terribly when you take your shears to me!"

Branches cannot think, see, or speak, but we can. And what such branches might say is what we do say when our Heavenly Father takes out His shears to prune us. We want to be branches in the vine. But we do not want the suffering that comes when we are pruned. We think we are doing just fine, producing enough fruit, without God our Heavenly Father interfering in our lives with His sharpened shears.

But how foolish for us to think this way. We would become Christians in name only were our dear Father not to prune us. Were He to let us alone, our fruits in time would become tasteless and worthless. And then, would He not as Jesus here says, put away His pruning shears and take out His cutting shears and remove us from the vine?

When we are afflicted, therefore, afflicted by the devil and the sinful world, these troubles and sorrows are the pruning shears our dear Father in heaven uses on us. Like a master vinedresser, He permits Satan and the world to cut away on us with their sharp teeth. But only as far as He permits. Only to prune us so that we produce more fruit. Satan fully intends to harm us when he cuts away on us. But Satan is not in charge. God is. And He uses what Satan intends for harm for our good.

Whatever you must endure as a branch in the vine, remember that the Vine Himself endured such affliction and so much more. Jesus faced more than the teeth of the pruning shears on the cross. He faced the very jaws of hell itself. He endured the sharp and bitter wrath of His Heavenly Father. He did this for you. And therefore, He is for you and me the true and living Vine. And we are, as He says here in our text, *“Already clean because of the word He has spoken to us.”*

It is not your pain that makes you clean, but Jesus’ pain on the cross. It is not the suffering you endure as you are pruned that makes you clean; it is Jesus’ suffering for you. You are clean because Jesus took your uncleanness to His cross and there He suffered and died. And it is this word of the cross that declares you to be clean. This word, the word Jesus spoke to you in your baptism, the word Jesus speaks to you in Holy Absolution, the word He speaks to you as He feeds you His body and blood in the Sacrament. It is this word of Jesus that makes you clean, cleansed of all sin; pure as He is pure; holy and innocent in God’s eyes. This word of Jesus declares you to be forgiven, clean through and through.

And moreover, my friend, this means that it is not the fruits you produce that make you clean. So many stumble over this. They think that they are accepted by God because they produce the fruits of good works. No, my friends! God does not approve of you because of your fruits. You are clean, cleansed, approved by God even before you produce any fruits. You are a branch in the vine. You are in Christ. His words make you who you are. And because His words abide in you; because you abide in Him and He in you, the fruits will come.

It's all about Jesus. Remaining in Him. Abiding in Him and in His words. And surely, He desires for all of His branches to be strongly abiding in Him. But that’s not how it is. In my life, and I’m sure within yours, there have been times when we were not so strongly abiding in Jesus.

And do you not have loved ones – I know I do – who are weak branches? Branches barely hanging onto the vine? We fear for them, don’t we? We want them to strongly abide in Jesus. We want to see abundant fruit in their lives. And perhaps we fear that their Heavenly Father, the vinedresser, will take out His cutting shears and remove them from the vine.

But remember, my friends, that He who is the True Vine is also the Good Sheperd who seeks His wandering, yes, His lost sheep. Remember how He dealt with Simon Peter who had cut himself off from the vine by denying Jesus three times. He forgave him, and He restored him to his place in the vine. Remember that our Heavenly Father sent His Son not to condemn the world, but to rescue sinners. And such are we. And such are your loved ones. Branches always in need of being reconnected to the vine. Sheep constantly needing to be found. And sinners daily needing to be forgiven.

And you are. You are forgiven. Each and everyone of you is forgiven of all sin. You are clean. Cleansed thoroughly by the blood of Christ. And so, go in peace, my friend, as you abide in Jesus and He in you. Amen.