

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Last week you were a sheep. Today you're a branch.
And as a branch, you're supposed to bear fruit.
Now, the main fruit you should bear is faith, and from that flows love and hope and joy.
And because you're a branch, you shouldn't be so surprised or proud of the fruit you bear.
That's just what you're supposed to do. That's who you are.
If you don't produce fruit, you're not a good branch; you're a dead branch.
You'll be cut off the vine, gathered into a dead-branch pile, and tossed into the fire.
So I guess you better make sure you're a branch that bears good fruit.

Now let's drop the metaphor.

You're a Christian.
And as a Christian, you're supposed to bear good works.
The primary good work you should bear is faith, and from that love and hope and joy.
And because you're a Christian, you shouldn't be surprised or proud of the good works you do.
That's just what you're supposed to do. That's who you are.
If you don't produce good works, you're not a good Christian; you're a dead Christian.
You'll be cut off from Christ, gathered into a dead-Christian pile, and tossed into the fires of hell.
So I guess you better make sure you're a Christian who does good works.

That's how this passage runs in the way of the Law.

The Law focuses on us, on our works, our fruit, our measuring ourselves to see how well we do.
The Law is that scale that lets us see how we stack up against others,
to see whether we need to do something more before we're cut off and tossed in the fire.
The Law demands our works; it demands good fruit from us.
The Law holds us accountable to who we're supposed to be and what we're supposed to do.
The Law frightens us. It creates a fear of death or hell within us.
And so it motivates us to change something, to do something to avoid the punishment.
But pretty soon we get comfortable again under the Law. Pretty soon we say,
"Oh, I'm in good shape—not nearly as bad as those other branches down there.
I bore fruit last month, it's his turn today."

The Law convicts us.
And because we don't like that conviction, at least not for too long or too hard,
we try to change the law, soften its demands, and justify its real intent.
In other words, we make up a new law, an easier and less demanding law,
but still a law by which we can judge how well we do and where we stand.

But the problem with the Law is that it can never produce fruit.
No matter how hard it threatens, no matter how cutting its accusations, no matter how strictly it's enforced—the Law can never produce fruit (and neither can it get you to do any good works).

For example, take one of those branches in your yard ripped from a tree during the tornado.
 While it still may have some green in its leaves, and perhaps even buds—
 the longer that branch sits in your yard, the browner and drier it'll get.
 No matter how hard you try to convince that branch that it needs to bear fruit,
 no matter how severe the threats, or how clearly you describe the fruit that it should bear,
 no matter how winsome or motivational or kind you act,
 that branch is a dead branch—it's been cut off from the tree—*no fruit*.

And the same goes for you, too.

On your own, you're a dead branch.
 St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, calls you a dead man, road kill; in the Greek: *nekros!* (2:5)
 And as a dead branch, an original sinner, you can't do any good works.
 No matter how convincing the need for such works is,
 no matter how strong the threats, or the terror of the punishment of hell,
 no matter how informative, or winsome, or motivational, or kind the message sounds,
 you can never produce good works by the Law.

A branch that doesn't bear fruit is hardly worth being a branch any more—better for kindling.
 And so a Christian that doesn't bear good works is hardly worth being a Christian any more, too.

That's how the Law talks.
 It's cutting, forceful, terrifying, and depressing.
 And worst of all, it's true.
 We're all a bunch of dead branches, dead Christians, original sinners;
 and we're all well-deserving of that bonfire.

Now, notice that in all that talk of the Law, we not once spoke of Christ.
 Not once did we hear of the vine, or the vinedresser.
 Not once did we hear of His grace or mercy,
 of His pruning and cleaning and forgiving and nourishing.

That's because the Law doesn't speak that way. For that you need the word of the Gospel.
 And thanks be to God that Jesus doesn't leave us with the Law, that the accusation isn't the end.
 He doesn't let us simply be dead branches or dead Christians, or fruitless followers.

No, Jesus says,
 "I am the true Vine" (Jn 15:1).

Jesus tells us of Himself.
 He speaks of His life.
 He calls our attention away from ourselves, away from our fruits or lack of fruits,
 and He fixes our eyes on *Him*.

He is the True Vine.
 And any branch *in Him* is a fruitful branch.

It's not because these branches are special in themselves.
 It's not because they're inherently better than branches found on other trees or vines.
 It's because He is the True Vine,
 and the life that comes from Him produces the fruit that the branches bear.

If these branches decide they want to try producing fruit on their own, apart from this Vine,
 they'll fail and dry up, and be tossed in the fire.

But Christ says,

**“Remain in Me, and I in you.
 Just as a branch is not able to bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine,
 so also neither are you unless you remain in Me.
 I am the Vine, you are the branches.
 The one remaining in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit,
 but without Me he can do nothing.”**

If we are to bear fruit, good works, faith, and love, then we must be *in Christ*.

But now you see how silly the Law is when it comes to trying to get good fruit out of you.
 If you want to see good fruit, then you must be in Christ.

And the Law can't do that.

The Law can't get you in Christ, it can't join you to Him.

St. Paul also says in Galatians,

**“Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the Law,
 for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the Law is not of faith”** (Gal 3:11-12).

Telling you what good works you should do won't actually get you to do them.
 Threatening you, either with hell or anything else, won't bring forth any good works.
 And no matter how winsome or motivating the Law is presented, it will never create faith,
 and without faith, without being joined to Christ and His life,
 you'll never actually get good works.

So if it's good works we want, love flowing from faith, then it must be the Gospel that does it!
 It must be Christ who supplies the life that flows through the branches.

It's Christ who does it all—not us.

He is the True Vine, and we've been brought into Him.

Our life has been joined to His, our body has been brought into the Body of Christ.

You are in Him and He is in you.

Not by the Law, but by His grace.

By Holy Baptism like the Ethiopian Eunuch, today.

By Holy Communion, where we drink the fruit of the Vine, Jesus Christ!

By Holy Absolution, where the word of the Gospel, the forgiveness of your sins, is spoken again!

It's all Jesus. Who He is and what He does, *for you!*

By His cross and resurrection He is the True Vine that will never fade or be destroyed.
And no tornado can rip you off of Him!

And because you are in Christ,
because you've been baptized into His name, and received His life, and entered His story,
you are a fruitful branch, a faithful Christian.
You have been crucified with Christ.
It is no longer you who lives, but Christ who lives in you (Gal 2:20).

And the works that come out of your hands and mouth the love that flows from your faith,
are not your own works, they're Christ's works.

He loves and feeds and nourishes and protects.
He comforts and consoles, He teaches and He rejoices—
and He does it all with you and through you and for you.

Jesus is the True Vine.
You are His true branches.

He produces the fruit,
and by the grace of God you bear that fruit for the sake of your neighbor.

It's all about Christ, and Christ *for you*.

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