

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

'I am the vine; you are the branches.'

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It is written: *'A wise man will hear, and will increase in learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels. To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.'*

Indeed are the sayings of God's Word *dark*; that is to say; indeed they are difficult to understand.

We forget this. We hear the word of God week after week; many of us read it day after day, and some have numerous verses and passages committed to memory. The Word of God is familiar. It is so familiar that we forget that it is *'wise, a dark saying.'*

Our Lord speaks: *'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.'*

What does it mean that Christ is a vine? Why not a tree? Why not an oak, or an elk, or an elephant? But he will not be any of these things, for he tells us plainly, *'I am the vine.'*

And this vine has branches which grow forth from the vine: some do not bear fruit. And what is their fate? To be cut off. Some do bear fruit. And what is their fate? To be pruned.

And yet, what is it to be pruned, but to be cut? So does not the fate of the fruitful and the unfruitful branches end the same, in being cut off?

Our translations fail us here, for this saying of Christ is stranger than it seems, for

Christ does not say merely, *'cut off' and 'pruned'*. Rather, he says that the branches bearing no fruit shall be *'cut off'* and those that do bear fruit *'shall be cut off greatly'*. And *cut off greatly*, that they might *bear more fruit*. But what branch, when severed from the vine, *'even more greatly' 'bears more fruit'?*

The image becomes stranger still: *'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.'* And yet, to bear fruit, the branch must *abide in the vine*; but in bearing fruit, it shall be *cut off greatly*, and this still, that the severed branch may *bear more fruit*.

'This is a hard saying, who can understand it?'

'So Philip ran to him and heard the eunuch reading the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"'

The eunuch does not understand, even as we do not, for so it is written, a guide is required *'to understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.'*

Who then, shall guide us through this darkness? Hear Our Lord's voice: *'Apart from me, you can do nothing.'* Therefore, let Christ be our guide, and his Spirit our teacher, his life our *wise counsels*.

Christ is the vine; and it is the nature of the vine to crawl upon the ground; so Our Lord *'was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man'* and walked upon the earth, *'pleased as man with man to dwell.'*

Yet it is the nature of a vine to crawl upon the earth only until it finds a staff or tree by which to rise up towards the sun. Our Lord did indeed find a staff, akin to that staff of Moses; Our Lord did indeed find a tree, the wood of the cross. And by this staff and tree he bore himself up towards the sun of his *Father, who is in heaven*.

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter

and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,

so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.'

It is the nature of the vine, once it was born itself upon the wood of a tree to then bear grapes.

So the Lord *bore much fruit*, being crucified, Golgotha a winepress, which rendered from the torments and tortures which Our Lord suffered the wine of his blood. Indeed, this is the wine of the fruit of Christ, the true vine: the blood of suffering, the blood of life, which poured out from his flesh, that it might bring life to the flesh of dying men. Such is the mystery of the Atonement, such is the fruit of *the true vine*.

'Who can describe his generation

For his life is cut off from the earth.'

Indeed, the Lord who is himself the true vine, is himself cut off in his crucifixion, and greatly so. Yet the metaphor breaks down. For Christ is not like such a vine, that, being cut off, he withers and dies, but is a different kind of a vine, a true vine, that being cut off, he rises again, and by his blood *bears much fruit*. And, indeed, in dying, accomplishes the will of God, even as Jesus tells us, *'By this my father is glorified.'*

Do you understand now, when the Lord says *'every branch that does bear fruit he cuts off greatly'*? It is no contradiction that the branch which bears fruit must be *cut off greatly to bear much fruit*, for the vine itself was first *cut off* that it might in wine and blood bear innumerable souls unto salvation. *'No disciple is greater than his master' for 'even as they have hated me, so shall they hate you.'* So the true vine was cut off, that it might produce the fruit of the wine *which makes glad the hearts of men*, salvation hidden in the shedding of innocent blood.

Do you understand now, when the Lord says *'Abide in me' 'Whosoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit'*? The Lord invites you to partake in his life; which means that he invites you to partake in his death. He invites you to partake in his joy, which means he invites you to partake in his suffering. He invites you to produce his wine, which means he invites you to shed your blood. For the fruit of the tree of Christ is the blood of his crucifixion, so too the fruit of the branch of the Christian must be the suffering of our persecution.

It is the fruit of Christ's crucified body and blood that is promised to all the baptized. It is baptism itself which promises to us that we shall live the life of the Crucified, '*For by baptism, you were baptized into the death of Christ.*' Do you tremble to know that this is the inheritance promised you in baptism? His blood, and the promise of his suffering.

His fruit lies prepared for us upon this altar. In former times, Christians approached the altar with *fear and trembling*, for they knew that to drink his blood was to become a branch joined to the true vine. They knew that to bear the fruit of the branch was to *be cut off greatly*. For this reason, the Sacrament of the Altar was known as the *viaticum*, that is, the provision for a journey, more specifically, the journey into death.

And yet they did not reject the Lord's baptism, nor did they deny his inheritance, so they came to the table, though *in fear and trembling*, for *by this, the Father is glorified, that we bear much fruit and so prove to be the Lord's disciples*. They came to the table, for they knew that, as Christ was a vine that, being cut off, could not die, so the Christian was a branch that, being cut off, could not be given unto death.

Even if he be killed, a Christian cannot die.

Even if you are killed, dear Christians, you cannot die.

For this reason, we *count even our suffering as joy, life as Christ, and death as gain*. Nothing stands before the Christian, nothing mocks him, nothing causes him to fear, for he is baptized, once dead, never to die again, for he is in Christ, and Christ is in him, for Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed, alleluia.

"See, here is the water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And Philip baptized the eunuch, and he went on his way rejoicing.'

'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:1-11; John 15:1-8.