

May 2, 2021
Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 15:1–8

I.N.I.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Richard A. Lammert at Zion Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

Theme: “Abiding in Christ”

In the name of ✠ Jesus. **Amen.**

During the Easter season, our Gospel readings are taken from the discourses of Jesus with His disciples. Last week, we heard Jesus call Himself the Good Shepherd. In today’s reading, Jesus calls Himself the true vine. But don’t worry; you don’t need to know much about vines to understand Jesus. He explains what you need to know.

The verb that occurs again and again in our reading is the verb *abide*. There is nothing particularly special about the verb. We could just as easily translate the word as “remain with” or “stay with.” But we are accustomed to “abide,” and so I will stick with it.

Jesus says in the middle of our text, “Abide in me.” Since Jesus Christ is the one speaking, Jesus’ words say, “Abide in Christ.” We consider our Gospel reading with the theme “Abiding in Christ.”

Imagine hearing our text for the first time, as one of the disciples. We know exactly where Jesus ends up, but the disciples have to piece it together as it comes. Jesus describes Himself as the true vine, and His Father as the vinedresser. Then Jesus immediately continues, “Every branch in me . . .” (John 15:2)—but who are these branches? We especially want to know as Jesus continues, “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he [the Father] takes away.” But then Jesus continues talking about with branches that *do* bear fruit.

We—the disciples—still don’t have all the pieces. Jesus continues, “Abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4). We’re getting closer. Here Jesus has the “in me,” which He had used a few sentences earlier about branches, when He talked about branches abiding in Him. Then, halfway through our reading, we know for sure. Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches” (John 15:5).

So we—the disciples, and all believers in Jesus Christ—are the branches. We are the people to whom Jesus says, “Abide in me.” It is easy to get stuck on that first sentence about branches that are taken away because they do not bear fruit, and then again later in our reading as Jesus talks about branches being thrown into the fire and burned.

But that is looking at the wrong end of the situation. Jesus told to the disciples, “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). There we have branches bearing fruit, precisely because they are abiding in Christ. If we start with what Jesus says, “Abide in me,” we have the pieces in the correct order: abiding first, then bearing fruit.

This is not just what I say; it's in the text. Jesus gives no admonition to the branches to look at the kind of fruit they are bearing. It's the *Father's* job to take away branches that are not fruitful and burn them. The job of the *branch* is to abide in the vine.

And note carefully that this is not an independent activity of the branch. Several times Jesus combines His "abide in Me" with an "I in you." This is a reciprocal relationship. Jesus does not, and cannot, allow you to "go it alone" in abiding in Him.

So, what does it mean to "abide in Christ"? St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom 6:3). St. Paul continues with the significance of being baptized into Christ when he writes to the Galatians: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 13:27–28). If you are baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ and are in Christ.

And we have the words from St. Paul to the Christians in Corinth: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Any person in Christ is a new creation. And that new creation is bound to bring forth good fruit.

When we start from the right starting point, the desired result follows. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4). "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).

The key is "abiding in Christ," abiding in your baptismal grace, abiding in your call to become a precious child of God. And if you abide in Christ, remember that simultaneously Christ is abiding in you; you have put on Christ. The triune God dwells in you, and God empowers you to live the Christian life and to produce good fruits.

Having started now with the basis of the Christian life "in Christ," you can profitably take a look at fruits. If you think of the fruits of the Spirit, as St. Paul lists them, you might well consider that your love and peace and joy are not as full or as complete as they should be. Then repent, and look to Christ for the power to bring forth better fruits.

But don't use these sometimes stale and unappetizing fruits to question your status as a Christian. You and I live in this physical body while still here on earth, a physical body that has been corrupted and weakened by sin. Our fruits will never look to us as good as they should be. Just remember Jesus' statement: if you abide in Him, you *will* bear much fruit.

Another reason that I don't think too much emphasis should be put on bearing fruits is that Jesus didn't say *what* the fruit was that the branches were to bring forth. Although I will not deny that the fruits of the Spirit can very well be thought of here, I think a good case can be made to think of the fruit that the branches bring forth as the fruit of eternal life.

Here are some more passages from St. Paul, each starting with the "in Christ"

that we have already established. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “For as in Adam all die, so also *in Christ* shall all be made alive” (1 Co 15:22). And to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote considering the Last Day, “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead *in Christ* will rise first” (1 Thess. 4:16).

Those who are “in Christ” are already alive, now and in eternity. This understanding of the branches’ fruit also provides a ready explanation for the branches that are taken off, gathered together, and burned. These branches are not really “in Christ”; they already have no life in themselves; they are dead and only suitable for burning.

There is one more “abide in me” statement in our text that I haven’t yet quoted: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). First, let me make a few brief comments on the last part: “Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” As children of our dear heavenly Father, we are permitted—and indeed commanded—to talk to God in prayer.

But this is certainly not *carte blanche* statement to cause us to expect that God will give us everything for which we ask. Jesus prayed that the cup of God’s wrath would be taken from Him; it wasn’t. Now, certainly, Jesus prayed to God that “if it be your will,” so you could say that the prayer was answered.

God did not, however, give Jesus what He desired. God answered that prayer of Jesus with a “no,” because Jesus had to suffer and die for the sins of the whole world, taking the punishment for those sins in His own body. Only in that way could we sinners be reconciled to God, be baptized into Christ, and be in Christ as a branch in a vine. If God had said “yes” to removing the cup of His wrath, we wouldn’t be here.

In considering the statement, we also have the first verse of Psalm 23 that we heard last week: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing.” God will certainly give us everything we need, even without our prayer; but he here invites us to approach Him in prayer to ask for those things.

As we continue with our theme of “abiding in Christ,” we need to add Jesus’ words here to our consideration: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you.” Here Jesus expands upon or explains somewhat differently what He previously said simply as “and I abide in you.”

From where I sit in the chancel when serving as deacon, I can look at the stained-glass windows in the north transept—although I know the same image is in the south transept. One can read too *much* into a stained-glass window, but one can also in err in reading too *little* into a window. Even if I am reading too much into the window, what I see is perfectly biblical and correct.

I see the outline of two doors that look like church doors, since the vertical brown doorposts are topped by a brown arch. There are two doors, but only three doorposts, since the middle doorpost is shared between the two doors. Arranged along the top of each arch is a line of circles touching each other, six in number.

The sixth circle is shared between the two arches, balanced between them as the arches come together on the middle doorpost. There *would* be room for a seventh circle

if we simply moved the doors apart, giving each door its own doorpost. But as the door frames are arranged in the window, there is no room.

I see the six circles as six days, looking in toward the doors from the outside of the church. Six days out of seven. Where is the seventh circle? It's *inside* the church, right here where you are. It is not on the doors outside, but here inside the church. *You* are in the seventh circle, the seventh day.

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” That’s the Third Commandment. “What does this mean?” Luther asks. And Luther answers for all of us, “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.”

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you” (John 15:7)—here you are, in the seventh day, the Sabbath Day, holding God’s Word sacred and gladly hearing and learning it. God’s words are abiding in you, strengthening *your* abiding in Christ.

When you continue to hear God’s Word, God keeps you grounded in Him, or rooted in the vine that is Christ, to use the metaphor from our text. God’s Word continues to reinforce that you are “in Christ,” making that connection stronger. God’s Word continues to show you your need for your Savior, causing you to rejoice that God *has* called you to Him in holy baptism.

This is so because where God’s Word is, there is also Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works through the Word—and we have no promise from God that He will work through anything else—to forgive you your sins, sins you might recognized when *do* glance at the fruit you are bringing forth. The Holy Spirit works through the Word to point you to Jesus Christ, who offered His life as a ransom for many, especially for you.

The Holy Spirit works through the Word to bring you through this life to everlasting life. The Holy Spirit works through the Word to tell you what God has commanded and what He has promised. And the Holy Spirit works through the Word to bring us to love what God has commanded and to desire what He has promised, as we prayed in the Collect of the Day.

And here, in church, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, comes to you in His own body and blood, the body that was given for you and the blood that was shed for you on the cross of Calvary. Through these, Jesus reminds you that you are His and He is yours, placing a physical seal, as it were, upon His “You are mine.”

The words of dismissal at Holy Communion are not scriptural—that is, directly from Holy Scripture—but they are biblical: “The Body and Blood of your Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life everlasting.” You are not alone in your abiding in the vine. If at times you might think you are holding on for dear life, these words remind us that Jesus is holding on to *you*, keeping you attached to Himself, the true vine.

Jesus will do this, strengthening and preserving you, until you are safe in heaven with eternal life. There you will experience and enjoy forever and ever what it is to “abide in Christ.”

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**