

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

You know very well that the Scriptures use different pictures of the relationship of Christ and His Church: the Church as Christ's body, Christ Himself as the Head (Col. 1:18); the Church as the Bride of Christ the Bridegroom (Isa. 62:4-5); the Church as a structure, a temple, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-22).

Yes, the Holy Spirit uses all sorts of pictures and images in the Bible to tell the story of our salvation. We often call them figures of speech. Dr. Voelz, in his book *What Does This Mean? on Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, uses the word “nonliteral” instead of “figurative” — he didn't want to use the word “figurative,” because, he said, “for many [it] has the connotation of unreal or insubstantial” (footnote 1, p. 168). Right. Figures of speech don't mean “unreal.” Biblical figures of speech still convey the truth, just in a nonliteral way.

I didn't focus on this relationship last Sunday as we heard Jesus say of Himself: “*I am the Good Shepherd*,” (John 10:11), but it's there. He is the shepherd, and we are the sheep, the sheep of His flock, the Church, who listen to His voice and follow Him (John 10). Luther said it this way: “a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd [John 10:11–16]” (Smalcald Articles, Third Part, Article XII The Church, 2). And it's obvious — Jesus isn't talking literally there. You're obviously not literal sheep walking on all fours, bleating out your “baaa's,” animals covered with wool. It's a Biblical metaphor — perhaps more obvious as a simile as Isaiah put it: “*All we, like sheep, have gone astray*” (Isa. 53:6); but we all understand this, and we understand that Jesus is a shepherd, and we're His sheep. He's just not a literal shepherd of literal sheep.

The Ethiopian eunuch as he read from Isaiah the prophet also understood that the sheep and lamb that he was reading about in that verse was not a literal sheep. He asked: “*About whom ... does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?*” And Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. Jesus is that sheep. Jesus is the Passover lamb that was sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7). Last Sunday, Jesus was the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. In Isaiah, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy; He is “*the Lamb of God, [sacrificed to take] away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29).

And so, to our Gospel today ... Jesus again uses a metaphor to talk about Himself and our relationship to Him. Jesus says, “*I am the true vine*,” and shortly thereafter, “*I am the vine; you are the branches*.” The question is: what are the truths that Jesus is teaching us by this figure of speech, by this nonliteral use of words? I'll name three.

First, Jesus teaches us the importance of branches remaining attached to the Vine. Only attached to the Vine does one remain a living member of the Church. Only in this way do the branches bear fruit. Cut off from the true Vine, branches wither and die. They bear no fruit. They are taken away. They are gathered up and thrown into the fire. Jesus is speaking here of the judgment, and for unbelievers the judgment is *“Depart from me, you cursed.”* The judgment is an unpleasant eternity of *“fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* (Matt. 25:41).

On the other hand, for those who abide in Jesus, He abides in them. The juices of the true Vine flow from Him into the branches, and they bear fruit. As sinners, though, we are not naturally attached to the true Vine. We must be grafted in. The Ethiopian eunuch realized this as Philip taught Him about Jesus, the sheep slaughtered for the salvation of the world. *“See, here is water,”* he said. *“What prevents me from being baptized?”* And Philip baptized him, grafting him onto Jesus.

But being grafted onto Jesus does not guarantee that you will remain in Him. You must abide in Him, Jesus says. You must continue to have the juices of Jesus flow into you, the branch! By this we bear much fruit; by this we show ourselves to be His disciples. And Jesus says how: *“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you”* It’s what Jesus had taught earlier: *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”* (John 8:31-32).

It’s what our confessions teach: *“After God (through the Holy Spirit in Baptism) has kindled and caused a beginning of the true knowledge of God and faith, we should pray to Him without ceasing [1 Thessalonians 5:17]. We should ask that through the same Spirit and His grace, by means of the daily exercise of reading and doing God’s Word, He would preserve in us faith and His heavenly gifts, strengthen us from day to day, and keep us to the end”* (FCSD, II:16). Truly, the *“one who endures to the end will be saved”* (Mark 13:13).

Second, Jesus teaches the place of doing good in the life of a Christian. He calls it fruit, and it is expected. It begins with love, as St. John taught: *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.”* Love is who God is, and love is what God has done in Christ Jesus. Therefore, we also love. *“[I]f God so loved us — through the Son, through His cross — we also ought to love one another,”* and we do as we remain connected to the Vine. *“We love because he first loved us.”*

Moreover, Jesus calls for abundant fruit, *“Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears MUCH fruit.”* The fruit of love blossoms into joy, and joy into peace, and peace into patience and kindness and goodness, and that into

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All these are what St. Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

No true Christian, attached by faith to Jesus the true Vine, is without fruit. They may not be grandiose works, lauded by many, but Christians produce fruit, as St. James teaches: *“faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”* (James 2:17). A fruitless branch will be cut off from the Vine, no longer a Christian. As Jesus said, *“apart from me you can do nothing.”* The branch cut off withers and dies and is cast into the fire.

But, third, Jesus teaches that the God *“who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Tim. 2:4) will do all He can to save the branch that is producing even the scantiest bit of fruit. He will not cut it off, but prune it, that it might *“bear more fruit.”*

Dear Christians, the sufferings you endure in your lives are no indicator that God has abandoned you. Rather, they indicate that God is working on you to strengthen your faith — to strengthen your connection to Jesus. He is working on you to fill you with the good fruit of love and even more of the Spirit’s fruit. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to endure these sufferings as God’s discipline. *“God is treating you as sons”* (Heb. 12:7), he says. And though this discipline may be unpleasant, it is intended to yield *“the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”* (Heb. 12:11). Paul, too, talks about the fruit that comes from the pruning of suffering, the fruit of rejoicing (that is, joy in Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit” list), and endurance (that is, patience), and character (that is, kindness and goodness and gentleness and self-control), and hope (that is, faithfulness and peace) (Rom. 5:3-5).

But remember, lest you become burdened down with the necessity of bearing fruit ... fruit-bearing is natural. It happens naturally for branches attached to the Vine. The juices of love flow from the Vine into the branches, and they bear fruit: loving as Christ loved you, forgiving as you have been forgiven (Col. 3:13), comforting with the comfort you have received (2 Cor. 1:4). The only way to mess things up is to cut yourself off from this natural flow of love from the Vine to the branches, to cut yourself off from Christ and His Word and Sacraments.

Therefore, abide in the Vine, dear branches, that you might live, and that the love of Christ might be manifest in you. Abide in your baptisms through daily contrition and repentance; let Jesus’ words abide in you as His disciples; feed on Jesus’ flesh and drink His blood, and you will abide in Jesus and He in you (John 6:56). You will bear much fruit. Then others will see this good fruit, and *“give glory to [the] Father who is in heaven”* (Matt. 5:16). To Him alone be the glory.

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