

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

It has been a bit of a rollercoaster ride for me this week. Of course, there were a lot of things going on this week: various meetings (I couldn't make them all), the vicarage placement and call services (I was happy to get to those and rejoice with our new vicar-elect and pastor-elect and their families). But busyness does not put me on a rollercoaster.

There was all the turmoil in Baltimore, and that was surely troubling, to watch another US city being torn down and looted. And I surely understand the call for justice. Our God is a God of justice: *“The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”* He calls upon governments to execute justice; He calls upon us to observe justice and to do righteousness. Who doesn't know the passage from the prophet Micah, *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

Still, I watched that from afar, from the safety of my own house. That didn't put me on the rollercoaster. No, it began with a bit of trepidation over the oral arguments before the Supreme Court regarding same-sex marriage. That challenged me to read a book that I had heard about on this topic. And, of course, I had our Scripture texts to ruminate on. And so my mind was filled with vines and branches and fruit, and that was my rollercoaster.

For Jesus said in our Gospel today, *“I am the vine... the true one,”* leaving open the possibility that there are other vines out there—we might call them counterfeit ones. That's what I found in this book I was reading by none other than Matthew Vines. In some ways, that's kind of humorous, the Lord leading me to read Matthew Vines' book, *“God and the Gay Christian,”* as I'm thinking about Jesus, the true Vine.

Even odder, in his first chapter, Mr. Vines starts out by talking about Jesus' discourse in Matthew 7—in His Sermon on the Mount—about trees and fruit. I'm sure you remember it: how do you tell that someone is a false prophet? By his fruit. Jesus says, *“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”* And, of course, that's juxtaposed with what Jesus said in our Gospel lesson for today, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit....”* And again, *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”*

Of course, Jesus is speaking “metaphorically” in both of these passages, as He does in many places in Scripture; that is, He is using figurative language, like when Jesus tells His parables. Parables take work to understand because of the figurative language in them — the disciples often had to have them explained. Jesus is speaking figuratively here, but a bit later on in John on this same night, Jesus’ disciples seem glad that Jesus starts “*speaking plainly*” and stops “*using figurative language.*” But in these passages, it’s figurative...metaphorical.

Mr. Vines wants to use the metaphorical bad tree producing bad fruit as a way to change Christian teaching regarding homosexuality. He writes, “*Jesus’s test is simple: If something bears bad fruit, it cannot be a good tree.*” Since the Christian teaching on homosexuality throughout the ages has produced bad fruit—the suffering and loathing and sobbing and shame of homosexuals—it should be changed. Take it off the sin list. That’s what New York Times author Frank Bruni recently and approvingly quoted an author as saying: “*that church leaders must be made ‘to take homosexuality off the sin list.’*”

But is that what Jesus means when He says, “*You will recognize them by their fruits*”? I don’t think so. I think it’s much more in line with what Jesus says in our Gospel lesson today from John about staying attached to Him. In Matthew, Jesus is talking about false prophets, those who cloak themselves in unthreatening “*sheep’s clothing,*” but who by their teaching are truly “*ravenous wolves.*” The bad fruit of these false prophets is the howling of a wolf that “*snatches [the sheep] and scatters them.*” As Concordia St. Louis professor Jeff Gibbs writes, “*Since it is a prophet’s fruit, it must be what he prophesies—not his outward deeds, but his teaching, his message, his prophecy!*” This fruit is measured in part by “*the extent to which it conforms to the words of Jesus himself ... [That] will reveal whether the prophet is true or false, from God or from Satan.*”

In other words, you can tell a good prophet from a false one by how much his words conform to the words of Jesus—and His apostles and prophets. “*For many false prophets have gone out into the world.*” But His apostles and prophets, they “*are from God.*” Therefore, as John says, “*Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*” Or to say it in the way that Jesus says it in the Gospel, you can tell the difference by how much their words help branches stay attached to the true vine, sucking up the juices of the true vine, Jesus Himself. And in this way, YOU will remain His disciples. You will be branches that bud and flower and bear fruit.

Indeed, this is where Mr. Vines falls short in his analysis. He elevates the EXPERIENCE of homosexuals, troubled by the Biblical message and the subsequent consequences over trying to follow that message, over “*Scripture as*

*the standard for evaluating what is right and wrong ...*. For the Scriptures do not teach us a kind of “situational ethics” that asks “*What will happen if I do x?*” but rather a firm standard that asks “*What does God say?*” “*What does His Word teach?*”

Of course, what God demands of us is impossible. His is an exacting standard of holiness that we cannot reach on our own—which is why we must remain branches attached to the vine, for cut off from Him, we wither and die. We know that’s what happens to plants cut off from their source of nourishment; they wither and die and bear no fruit. That’s also what happens to disciples.

But we must be made disciples first, for we might ask, “*How does one become attached to the Vine in the first place?*” That has two parts. First, He who was begotten of the substance of the Father before all ages had to become the substance of His mother in this age; He had to become man. The Di-vine came down from heaven to become Vine, to take on creaturely vine-ness, that we, wild, unruly branches, might be able to be grafted onto this Vine as our source of life and love. This, of course, is incarnation language— the Word became flesh. But second, this grafting onto the Vine is the process of making disciples, and that happens, Jesus tells us, whether an Ethiopian Gentile or an American Gentile, by Holy Baptism. By these waters, and nothing you have done, God grafts you into this Vine, and His juices start to flow through you.

And what are these juices? They are the gifts Jesus has promised to give us: in His word and in His sacrament. “*If you abide in My word,*” Jesus says, “*you are truly my disciples. Then you’ll know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*” That’s the truth of the cross and of a death that sets you free from sin and death. That’s the truth of life eternal through Him who once died, but now lives in resurrection victory. For this Divine Vine had to be pruned by His Father, the vinedresser. He had to be cut and slashed; He had to bleed. He had to be cursed — hung on the dead wood of the tree of the cross. This Vine, the source of life, had to be pruned by the Father. He had to wither and die and be thrown into the fire in our place. He came down to endure all that Satan and hell and death could throw at Him—for YOU. He had to die, that whence death arose, thence life also might rise again. And that Satan who long ago overcame mankind by the tree in the garden, might likewise by the tree of the cross be overcome. These words are part of the communion liturgy spoken during Passiontide before we come to receive more of the juices of Jesus: His very body and blood, for “*whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.*”

Still, it is also true that we must in life suffer for a while. We will fail in our own righteousness; we will produce some bad fruit; as you might have confessed before your pastor: “*I have not let His love have its way with me, and so my love*

*for others has failed.” We will need to be pruned in suffering and repentance. But there’s the promise again: “after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”*

Indeed, establish you so that you might bear fruit. And just as we pondered what the fruit of the true and false prophets might be, so here we might ask: “*What is this fruit that results from being attached to Jesus?*” It’s the fruit, Jesus tells us, that glorifies the Father and provides proof that we are disciples, that shows that we have a living faith. For remember, without faith, it is impossible to please God; and Jesus says, “*apart from me you can do nothing.*”

Still, what is this fruit? Well, it’s not the riches, power, status, health that some false prophets, living in their fancy homes, being chauffeured in limos, flitting and flying about in their jets, proclaim—who say as they prey like wolves on unsuspecting sheep, “*if you just had faith like mine, you could have all this, too.*” No! Still, what is this fruit from branches attached to the true vine? Certainly it is as St. Paul called it: the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Our epistle really focuses in on that first named fruit: love. Love is what flows from branches attached to the Vine, love that comes from being born of God (that’s baptism language) and knows God (that’s faith and Spirit language). It’s a love that flows out of Him who first loved us and sent His own Son as the ultimate expression of love, giving up His own life unto death for us. So John says, “*love one another.*” But what of those who want to overturn God’s word and promote ungodliness? Love them. Don’t approve of ungodliness, but still love them, for God is love, and in your loving they will be shown God who abides in you. But the homosexual and those who spew vicious and venomous words at you because of Scripture’s teaching? Love them — genuinely. “*Bless those who persecute you*” — “*don’t curse them.*” “*Abhor what is evil; hold fast what is good.*” “*Do what is honorable.*” “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” Yes, “*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*” How can this be? Who can love in this way? Only those who are of God. Only those branches attached to the Vine. “*We love because He first loved us.*”

God grant that you may live your lives as living branches of that True Vine pruned for you: in the remembrance of your baptisms, in devotion to His word, in faithfulness to receiving His grace flowing from the vine — His Body and Blood in His Holy Supper, and in love to your neighbors, friend and foe, until His love is perfected in you and He calls you heavenward. God grant it ...

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