

28 April 2024  
Easter 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Fruity Christians”

Text: John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:1-21; Acts 8:26-40

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **[He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]** Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus wants you to bear fruit. As He said, He is the vine, and you are to be fruit bearing branches. The good fruit of good works born from love of God and love for your neighbor.

This is not a new teaching of Jesus. The image of a vine is all throughout the Bible and especially in the Old Testament. Israel is called God’s vine. The vine He brought out of Egypt and planted to grow in the Promised Land. And to talk of the good fruit of good works is not new or surprising either. For not only did God command good works, He also did not leave it up to us to figure out what a good work is and what it is not. He told us, in Ten Commandments. Ten Commandments which tells us not only what not to do, works that are not good, works to avoid; but also tells us those goods works we are to do. It is a surprisingly few number, perhaps, especially in our world where bigger is better, where more is better. Maybe it is so they could be easily remembered. So while the Jews at the time of Jesus had come up with 603 more, more rules, more definitions of good works, Jesus always stuck to the Ten. Because while only Ten, they also have an infinite number of applications - ways they are done and kept, and for whom they are done and kept.

And you know them. You’ve learned them. Always put the one true God first in your life. Honor His Name and gladly hear and learn His Word. Honor your parents and the other authorities God has given to take care of you. Respect His gift of life and the means by which that life is created, namely marriage. Protect what He has given, your neighbor’s possessions and good name. And don’t play God! Don’t try to rearrange the people and things God has given for your advantage and the disadvantage of your neighbor. Those are the good fruit Jesus is looking for in His branches, in your life.

So how’s your fruit? Many or few? Big, plump, and juicy, or small, anemic, and shriveled? I know my answer. I’ll bet I know yours, too.

God’s original vine, Old Testament Israel, did not produce the fruit God desired. Oh, at

times they did. But far more were the times they did not. When they turned to other gods; the gods of the nations around them. Far more were the times when their love grew cold and their wickedness grew abundant. Despite all God's care for them, instead of good grapes, they grew wild grapes; grapes good for nothing. Until finally God's patience and long-suffering ran out, and those branches were cut off. The nation of Israel, God's vine and vineyard, was no more.

But God promised the vine would grow again. And when Jesus was born, it did. A new vine, with new branches, and new fruit. Or is it a new vine but with the same old branches and same old fruit? For think about Jesus' twelve, the disciples - did they produce that good fruit Jesus speaks of? When they argued who was the greatest? When they asked Jesus if they should call down thunder and lightning from heaven on the Samaritans? When they rebuked Jesus for what He was doing? When they doubted and feared? When they denied knowing Him? When they ran away and hid in fear? Hearing these words of Jesus, did they wonder . . . wonder if they would they be the branches now cut off and thrown into the fire for their failures? Like Old Testament Israel? Like many perhaps wonder today?

Well, they were not. Because while they perhaps struggled a bit, they also did produce good fruit. We read about that all through the books of Acts. How the disciples preached and healed and loved and gave. Something changed in them. Something changed them. And what changed them was that **they received the Holy Spirit**.

And that's what makes these words we heard from Jesus today words for this Easter season. He spoke them the night He was arrested and taken away. But what He spoke of was what would come from His death and resurrection. Because if you were listening carefully to Jesus' words, **He does not command us to bear fruit**. He speaks of it, He desires it, but He does not command it. But He *does* command *something*, the something that will produce fruit - and that is that **we abide in Him**. Listen again to His words:

*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. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

Notice: the command is **to abide in Jesus**. The result of the abiding - or we could say the promise of that abiding - is that you will be fruitful branches. The work is His *through* you. His life and His love working *in* you and *through* you. And how we abide in Jesus and He in us is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who gives to us and keeps us alive with the life and love of Jesus. The Holy Spirit who is our connection with Jesus, bringing Jesus to us and us to Jesus. Without this connection to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, **we can do nothing**. Oh, we can do *some things*. We can sin! And we do plenty of that. But we can do nothing good. No truly good fruit apart from Jesus. Even our best works

are tainted with impurity and sin; selfishness, pride, patting ourselves on the back, expecting some reward, recognition, or favor just for doing what we are supposed to do.

So what Jesus is explaining to His disciples here - and to us - is **how things are now going to be different**. That you're not going to be on your own, or rely on your own strength, willpower, discipline, or faith to do and be who Jesus wants you to be and do. *Been there, done that, and failed!* Just like Old Testament Israel. But just as the coming of the Holy Spirit changed the disciples, or we could say, changed God's *Israel* - so the coming of the Holy Spirit has changed you as well. And with Jesus abiding in you and you in Jesus by the power and work of the Holy Spirit, **you will bear much fruit**. Or perhaps better to say, Jesus will produce much fruit through you.

That starts with your baptism, when the Holy Spirit grafts you onto the true vine, onto Jesus, and you receive new life from Him. New life that is strengthened by the Word, cleansed by forgiveness, and fed with the Body and Blood of Jesus. Through these means, Jesus abides in you and you in Jesus. So don't neglect these things. For to neglect them is to starve yourself, to cut yourself off from the source of your life, and you will die. And fruitless branches, dead branches, are cut off and thrown into the fire.

So to help you, Jesus says, that this might not be, not only have you been given the Spirit, you also have a loving heavenly Father who prunes you. And while you may not like being pruned, God pruning away from your life all that is distracting you from Him, all that is getting in the way, is good for you. So that you produce more fruit. Good fruit. Godly fruit. So if you are not producing those good fruits God desires in your life, the answer is not for you to try harder! The answer is not more you! The answer is more Jesus. More of His life and love and Spirit, given to you to work in you. And He will.

And one of those ways He will work is prayer. Jesus spoke of that as well. He said

***If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.***

Now those are words that are often misunderstood, I think. Words which cause people to think: *Woo hoo! Ask whatever I wish and I'll get it!* Why doesn't it mean that? Because those are your words, not Jesus' words! Your thoughts, not His thoughts. Your desires, not His desires. Jesus said, ***If you abide in me and my words abide in you***. And when Jesus' words abide in you, you'll pray for what He says, what He thinks, what He desires, not what you do. It's not wrong to pray for other things; but this promise is attached to Jesus' words, not your words. This promise is attached to asking for things like love, for forgiveness, for the Holy Spirit, for faith. Ask for those and it will be done for you. And ask for those, and you will produce that fruit that Jesus desires. The good fruit of a new life that comes through Jesus' death and resurrection for you.

It was the apostle John who wrote those words of Jesus today, and He would later go on to expand upon them in his First Epistle, from which we also heard today, where he talked about love and new life. That Jesus came to be the *propitiation* - or sacrifice, or atonement - for our sin, which, he says, was not just to save us *from* sin, **but to save us for Himself**. To raise us with Him to live a new life that starts now and lasts forever. **The new life the world needs**. A world living in sin and steeped in sin and getting more sinful by the day. Defining for itself what is good, unconcerned with what is godly, and persecuting those who do not go along . . . like you.

But you and your good fruit *are exactly what a hurting world needs*. Notice I didn't say *sinful* world. It is, but it is also hurting. Because that's what sin does - it's hurts. It promises and pretends to help, to enrich, to give life, to lift up, but it does the opposite. There is instead more and more hate, more and more confusion, more and more division, more and more every man for himself - more and more hurting. *And the world needs something new*. The world needs to see there is another way, and a *better* way. **The way of the love and life of Jesus**. Like Philip taught the Ethiopian man we heard about. It's not easy to be different and swim against the tide, but it is more important now than ever. That, as Jesus said, *they may see your good works, your good fruit, and glorify God*.

That's a little different way of thinking than many people are used to. That your good fruit, your good works, are not for your benefit, but for the world. But it makes sense if you know Jesus is working in you and through you. For everything Jesus did, everything Jesus *does*, is for the world. To bind up our wounds, to forgive our sins, to give hope to the despairing, to give strength to the weak, to provide for those in need, to comfort the sorrowful, and give life to the dead. All that you have been given, and all that He gives to others through you. The more fruit you bear, the more lives are touched. Blessing upon blessing. For that's the way of it with Jesus.

So come now to receive the feeding and forgiveness you need, the Body and Blood of Jesus, that He abide in you and you in Him. And as you leave this place, see how Jesus will use you and produce fruit for others. For a hurting world, filled with hurting people. He will, for that is why He came. That is why *Christ is risen!* **[He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.