

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 16:11-15; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

He is the Vine. You are the branches.

The other day when I was taking one of the boys to preschool, he coughed, and the teacher asked if he was feeling all right. I told her, "Oh, he's fine. He might be a little tired today, though, since we were up so late at the pig farm last night." She got the joke.

Today it's the swine flu. Tomorrow it'll be something else. The media needs stories, and so every day the world is going to end for one reason or another, whether it's Y2K, the swine flu, or something else. And one day it will end, but that will be with Jesus' coming. Still, have you been nervous? Have you been scared you might catch pig influenza, or whatever we're supposed to call it now? That's fine, but it ought not be what concerns us most. No, Jesus reminds of that in our Holy Gospel today, *"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."*

So, have you abided in Him? He leaves no doubt about how to tell. He says, *"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* So how's the harvest been? What does your fruit look like? And let's be honest.

St. John writes in our second lesson, in his first epistle, *"Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him."* Have you kept His commandments, and not only the ones you like, the ones that come easily to you, but all of them? And have you kept them not only when the eyes of others were on you, but always and in every way, with a pure heart and a willing mind? St. John begins that lesson with the admonition, *"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."*

I don't know about you, but part of the fun of sports is the camaraderie, being able to joke around with one another and poke fun. I can't speak for everyone else, but while I don't like a cocky player with a mouth that runs faster than his feet, I don't mind a little good-natured trash-talking. It can make a game a little more lively and competitive. In the end, however, talk is talk, and words never scored a point, blocked a shot, or won a race. And the same is true in our Christian lives. We should be more than talking Christians. We should be walking as Christians, living in and living out the love of Christ amongst our neighbors. So how have you done?

Almost all of us here have confessed the Faith, in our Baptism, at our confirmation, and every time we've joined together in the Creeds. We've talked the talk. Have we walked the walk? Are you a different man or woman inside these doors than outside them? Do you expect God to see you within these walls but not when you're without them? Sometimes people will apologize to me when they say or do something inappropriate when I'm around, because they think people shouldn't say or do such a thing around a pastor. Are you embarrassed when you sin in a sinful pastor's presence but not concerned when you do so in the presence of the ever-present and holy God? *"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."*

St. Luke writes in our second lesson:

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come

together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Does Lydia put us to shame? Have you listened carefully to the Word? Have you clung to Holy Baptism? Have you prevailed upon the Lord's ministers to preach and teach you more? Have you taken care to make sure that not only your heart but your household is a Christian one? Would your children or parents know that the Faith is important to you not only from the lip-service you've given it but the commitment you've shown to it?

Jesus says, *"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 it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."* As Christians, we do not come to Jesus for a pat on the back, for a shot in the arm or a pep talk, for a little help along the way. No, as Christians, we are utterly dependent upon Him. He is the Vine. We are the branches. Sin hacks away our connection to Him, cuts off the sustenance we draw from Him in Word and Sacrament, and while we might not die overnight, we will like the broken branches on that oak tree behind the parsonage after a storm slowly dry and wither until there is no doubt about our death. The wise man, woman, or child will not wait until that takes place to pay heed to Jesus' warning.

Jesus is the Vine. We are the branches. Though the preaching of the Word and Holy Baptism, He has grafted us into Himself, into His death and resurrection, and through that same preaching of the Word, through confession and absolution, through the Lord's Supper, He feeds and preserves us, He dwells in us and works through us.

Jesus does not expect a bumper crop overnight. He makes that plain: *"Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* Jesus does not want you to wither. No, He withered in death upon the cross that you might blossom in new life in Him, for you to grow in Him, slowly perhaps, but surely nonetheless. You are His branches, He promises to prune, yes, sometimes through crosses and trials, but for your benefit and bountifulness nevertheless. So pay heed, and cast off all that which would cut you off from Him.

"Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you," Jesus assures us today. Don't like purportedly flu-spreading swine wallow back in the mud, but renewed and whole in His mercy walk forth in His truth. After all, that's what He's saved and set you free to do.

He is the Vine. You are the branches. And today on this altar is found fruit of that Vine, the Blood of our Lord that bought you, to guarantee and reassure you of His abiding love for you and to provide you the strength to abide in Him. Amen.