

Gospel - John 15: 1-8

Easter 5

Sermon 5.2.21

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I suppose if you are like me, from time to time you worry and wonder about your own particular status as a branch. Am I still attached? Am I good enough or am I qualified or worthy enough to still be attached? Or am I going to end up like one of those unfruitful branches that finally are removed and discarded?

Although Jesus indeed warns that the Father “removes every branch in me that bears no fruit”; he goes on to emphatically pronounce, “**You have already been cleansed** by the word that I have spoken to you.” In another place, verse 16, Jesus says, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last.”

It is important that Jesus does not tell us, “I am the stock, and you are the branches.” Instead he says, “I am the whole true vine”—the root, the stock, the branches, the leaves, the fruit—“and you are the branches.” In other words, “I am you, and you are me.” If you prefer, “I am in you, and you are in me.” Because I am in you to begin with, therefore, “I cleanse you.” “I choose you.”

I address my words this morning especially to Don Kay who today is being baptized into Christ and his body. I address my words to all the baptized in Christ Jesus: Christ chose you. Christ claims you his own. He declares you did not choose him. Your choice, if any, has little or nothing to do with the grace of his claim. Christ chose you, set his mark on you by water and by the Spirit, and that mark settles the matter forever.

The promise of Christ’s preemptive cleansing choice is played out most evidently whenever an infant is brought to Holy Baptism. The infant has no choice in the matter when she is presented by parents and sponsors. Yet Christ is in attendance through the baptismal actions of his servants, and Christ lays his claim regardless of the infant’s volition.

Christ makes the first move, always. In one sense, Don, you did make a choice to be here this morning and present yourself. But long before this day Christ by his Spirit inspired in you the very idea. So here you are, standing in responsive obedience to the One who placed his call in your heart.

In the rite of holy baptism you do have a certain role to play. You will make certain renunciations. You will promise certain acceptations. And you will confess certain articles and vow to certain commitments.

You make certain renunciations. You will renounce the devil, evil powers and sinful desires.

Please know this: Of yourself, in your own mortal weakness, your renunciation is basically meaningless. Do you remember how Christ in the wilderness after his baptism made his own personal once-for-all renunciation against the devil? Well, he has made his own renunciation yours also. His is the more powerful, which makes yours all the more effectual.

You will also promise certain acceptations. You will promise to accept him as Savior, trust in his love and obey him as Lord.

Please know this: Christ's acceptance of you is not exclusively contingent on your acceptance of him. He accepts you first. He accepts you forever.

Our feeling of accepting Christ and our individual capabilities to trust and obey are temporal and transitory at best. They are relative to our quite limited human understanding. But the fact of Christ accepting us is eternal and exists far beyond either our mental comprehension or our consent.

And then you will confess to certain articles of belief. This morning we make use of the Apostles' Creed, because that is the creed of our baptismal covenant.

But know this: God believed in you long before you believed in God. God still believes. As Dr. Schuller used to repeat, "Believe in the God who believes in you." It's because God believes in you first, that it eventually leads to your believing in God next. God believes then goes to work to help you believe to the same level that God believes.

Thus God renounces first. God accepts first. And God believes first. They are the mighty certainties of faith and trust in God—that God does everything first, and we do everything next.

When heaven's curtains are drawn back and we understand things as they really are, we will see and know that she has been with us our whole life long, our companion and our guide, our source and our results.

On this basis she will then say in the hearing of all creation, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; enter into the joy of your Lord."

O the amazing grace of this baptismal gift! Or as Paul nearly shouts aloud in the book of Romans, "Now thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

It says in the rubrics that "Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble."

In the image from today's Gospel, "The bond which our Creator Father establishes between Christ the vine and Christ his branches the saints is indissoluble."

Indissoluble from God's point of view most definitely; dissoluble from our point of view, most likely—we need to change our point of view. I suppose this is why the instructive portion of our morning reading exhorts us to stay connected to Christ in the same way that Christ ever remains connected to us. Holy baptism is our guarantee of that connection, of our remaining and abiding and of our bearing much fruit.

Indeed the baptismal grace and covenant have their definite effects—good fruit, much fruit. Just as baptism marks you internally by grace; you also the bear external outward signs of Christian fruitfulness, what Paul describes as fruit of the Spirit, a life exemplified by traits of love and joy and peace.

Don, your life already attests to good fruit and much fruit.

We are all witnesses of your passion for Jesus, your love for God's people and God's house and your faithful heart of service in the Shelton community.

What then remains, except for you now to be baptized and enabled able to bear more and even better quality fruit?

Besides, qualities of love and joy and peace all feel really good.

They are a self-giving reward and pleasure to any person who possesses them. Who doesn't want more of that? Who wouldn't want more?

But when you think about it, fruit-bearing is not for self-serving the sake of the vine only, it's for food for animals and humans, for manufacture of wine and for seed for new plants. While the fruit of the Spirit feels really good to you, it feels even better and has greater impact in lives that you encounter.

Where did Jesus even come up with this image of a vine and its branches anyway? He draws it from a prophetic song in the book of Isaiah (27:2b-6), where the prophet describes true Israel as a productive, fruitful vine whose branches span to every land and nation. Isaiah writes,

*A pleasant vineyard, sing about it!
I, the LORD, am its keeper;
every moment I water it.*

*I guard it night and day
so that no one can harm it;
I have no wrath.*

*If it gives me thorns and briers,
I will march to battle against it.
I will burn it up.*

*Or else let it cling to me for protection,
let it make peace with me,
let it make peace with me.*

*In days to come Jacob shall take root,
Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,
and fill the whole world with fruit.*

The idea of spiritual pruning Jesus talks about in John 15 is not so much about discarding branches as it is about making a way for more and better branches and more and better fruit, until the whole world, until for example all Shelton and Mason County are filled to capacity with glorious life and fruit. This would include innocence; goodness; kindness; completeness; freedom; dignity; respect; no sorrow; no suffering; no mental anguish as we sometimes see on the streets, no pain, no despair, no addictions, no want, no hunger, and no injustice.

Don, your baptism now makes of you and the part you play all the more vital in this plan and vision of God.

When you see a sister or a brother in need you will help them.

When you see a sister or a brother being treated unjustly; you will oppose and subvert the systems of abuse, as Jesus did; because you will share all the good fruit of your love and joy and peace to lift a sister up or to lift a brother up.

Don, now you are to be baptized and made new.

You will discover yourself completely the same; and at the same time you will know you are now completely different.

Your old life, the life you once knew, is about to be immersed and drown in baptismal waters.

Then you will be raised again in Christ's resurrection, born anew and born from above.

You will be anointed and filled with God's Holy Spirit, as are all the baptized people of God.

But you in particular will be example and inspiration to all of us here, so that we will seek to follow in your steps.

You will bear much fruit. You will bear good fruit. And your fruit shall remain. Amen.