

John 15:1-8

It's nice that we have many thoughtful kids in our congregation. Our mothers are receiving corsages, cards, flowers, candy, and maybe a meal for Mother's Day. The good thing about this day is that we shower love upon our mothers. The bad thing about this day is that there are mothers who feel neglected the rest of the year. There are children who feel that if they check in with mom once a year and dote on her this one day, that's good enough.

Sadder still is the fact that we treat God like this kind of a mother. We don't abide in Him as Jesus commands. We "check in with Him" just every now and then. We treat God like a "casual acquaintance." Now here's a question: If God is just a casual acquaintance, then how can He be your Savior? How can He be the Vine to which you, as a branch, are attached?

Jesus doesn't say, "Check in with me every now and then." He says: "Abide in Me, as a branch abides in the vine." Now that's abiding! Branches don't "check in with the vine" every now and then. They abide. They remain attached to the vine.

It's no secret what happens to a branch that is not attached to the vine—it dies. It no longer receives sap from the vine and so it dies. In the same way, Jesus says, "If anyone does not abide in Me...he is thrown away, and withers, and will be cast into the fire." Christians who stop abiding in Jesus become dead branches, and will be thrown into the fires of hell.

Now that should grab our attention. Jesus uses words and images here that are pretty hard-hitting, because we need to be hit hard with the Law. We have deceived ourselves over the years with the wrong way of thinking. We compare ourselves to those people in the world who do not believe in Jesus. We compare our "abiding" with their lack of it. Compared to those people who don't even know Jesus, I'm abiding in Him pretty well, even though I only check in with Him now and then. Compared to someone who doesn't even own a Bible, I'm doing pretty well in opening mine just every now and then. Compared to those people who never go to church, I'm abiding in Christ just fine, even if I only attend every now and then.

But this kind of thinking is utter foolishness, and is a false deception of Satan to keep us from truly abiding in Jesus. There are only two kinds of people—those who abide in Jesus, and those who do not. Jesus says so. Either you and I are constantly attached to Him as a branch is attached to the vine, or we are dead branches, unattached to Him. There is no real difference between the unbeliever who couldn't care less about Jesus, and the Christian who is not abiding in Christ. Neither one is a living branch on the Vine. Both are dead branches, and both will perish.

If you have been the kind of Christian who has treated God like a casual acquaintance, then you need to repent. Do not resist the Holy Spirit who is working right now upon your heart. You and I need God to work on us through His Word of Law to recognize how utterly disobedient we have been. And we need His forgiveness so that He may keep us abiding in Christ. God doesn't want "thoughtful kids" who "check in with Him" every now and then. He simply wants us to abide in Jesus Christ.

People have said that you don't need to go to church to be a Christian, but that's not what Jesus says. "If you abide in Me and My Words abide in you...(then) you prove to be My disciples." If we're going to treat God like a "mother," then we need to see ourselves not as full-grown, independent children who check in with Him now and then, but as infant children who need our "Mother's" constant care and nourishment. It doesn't matter if you've had eight years of Christian Day School, or if you've been a Christian for sixty or eighty years—your entire life you remain God's child in desperate need of His continual life-giving Word.

A branch remains a living branch not because of what it knows, but because it remains attached to the vine. I'm glad you know the Bible stories about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the Prophets. I'm glad you know about Jesus Christ—that He suffered, died, and rose again Easter Sunday. There are millions out there who also know these things. Even the devil knows all this. But "knowing" is not "abiding." A branch that is cut off from the vine may well remember what the vine looked like. It may remember what life was like when it was once attached to the vine. But that memory, that knowledge does it no good. To be a living branch it needs to abide in the vine. To be living Christians, Jesus' disciples, you need to abide in Him.

So rejoice dear branch, dear child of God, for what you are is not your doing—it is the work of God. Branches are always on the receiving end. They don't give to the vine, the vine gives to them. And God has given to you. In Holy Baptism He joined you to Himself. He grafted you into Christ, the Vine. You didn't pick yourself up off the ground and join yourself to Jesus. You had no decision, so action in this. God, in mercy, attached you to your Savior. And once you were joined to Him through Holy Baptism, you became a living Christian, Jesus' disciple, because you were receiving life from Jesus.

That's how branches live. The constant nourishment comes to them from the vine. Your Christian life and the fruits of faith you produce are the result of the living Word that Jesus gives you, as you hear His Word, and read His Word, and receive His body and blood for you in the Sacrament. Jesus is no casual acquaintance. He is the living Lord, who died and rose again for you; who claimed you in Holy Baptism—He is the life-giving Vine in which you abide.

And I have good news for you! God does not love you any less if you have been failing to abide in Christ faithfully. Every branch of His, whether it is faithfully abiding in the Vine, or whether it has, through negligence, become separated from the Vine—every branch is the object of His grace and mercy. Whether you are faithfully producing the fruits of faith, or whether those fruits are lacking in your life because you are not abiding in Christ very well, does not affect what Christ Jesus has done for you and how He feels about you.

If you are baptized, then you are "already clean." (John 15:3) Jesus made you clean. You are not a dirty, thorny branch. Jesus has cleansed you. There is nothing in you that is repulsive to Him, for He has washed you clean. Everything wrong with you is forgiven. Your selfishness is forgiven. Your lust is forgiven. Your laziness is forgiven. Your failure to abide in Christ is forgiven. And this word of forgiveness which Jesus is giving you is the life-giving sap and nourishment which will keep you abiding in Him.

You know, it's a good thing for kids to honor their mothers on this day, and every day. But mothers know that the cards and gifts which they receive from their children can never come close to matching everything that they have done for their children over the years. And that's how it is with us and our Lord. He doesn't love you because you abide in Him. Rather, because of His love for you, He joined you to Himself. He's not pleased with you because you are here today to worship Him. Rather, because He is pleased with you for Jesus' sake, He has led you here to receive the nourishment from the Vine. He receives your honor, worship, and praise not because He needs it—but rather, because when you come here to give to Him, He is giving you the gifts of the Vine: forgiveness, eternal life, salvation.

Vines give. That's all they know how to do. And branches receive. Jesus doesn't tell you to abide in Him because He wants to be the “boss” in your life. He desires to give; to give to you; to give you eternal gifts; the gifts that do not wither, and that cannot be destroyed in the fire. As a mother longs to give milk and love to her infant child, so Jesus says, “Abide in Me, and I in you,” for the pure milk of His Word will then nourish you and keep you in the Faith unto everlasting life.

Mothers always want what's best for their children, don't they? You know what God wants for you? For the pastor to be able to say, at your funeral—to your loved ones, with tears in their eyes: Do not weep. For your loved one abided in Jesus, and for that reason your loved one is in heaven with the Lord.

May your life and mine, from this day forward, proclaim to our families, that by the grace of God we will abide in Jesus, like a branch abides in the vine. Amen.