

## WHERE IS YOUR FRUIT?

The Reverend David O. Guss, Pr.

Bethlehem Lutheran Church

St. Mark's Lutheran Church

St. Timothy Lutheran Church

Hallandale, FL

Coral Gables, FL

Miami Gardens, FL

April 29, 2018 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

**Children's Message:** *Stay Connected To Jesus!*

**Object:** a microphone

**Scripture:** John 15:1-8

**Hymns: Pro:** *Jesus, There Is Something About That Name* **Red:** *It Is No Secret What God Can Do*

Good morning, boys and girls. Have you ever used a microphone? I like using it because it makes my voice sound loud, so that people at the back of the church can hear me. Now, we might think that the microphone can make my voice sound louder all by itself, but it can't. The microphone has to be plugged into an amplifier before it will work. See, here's what it sounds like if the microphone is plugged in. (Say a few words into microphone) But, this is what it sounds if the microphone is unplugged from the amplifier. (unplug microphone, then say a few words into it.) What happened to the sound? The microphone just doesn't work if it's not plugged into the amplifier. The amplifier actually has all the power, not the microphone. The microphone only works if it's connected to the amplifier, the main source of power.

We're a lot like that microphone. As Christians, we also have a main source of power, too. What is that source of power? That's right, it's Jesus. Jesus is like our main power source. We get our hope and our happiness from him. We learn the difference between what's right and wrong from him. Just like a microphone doesn't work when it isn't plugged into the amplifier, we don't "work" as well if we don't stay connected to Jesus. But, how do we stay connected to Jesus? (Wait for 2 or 3 answers) That's right. Going to church to learn about Jesus is a good way to stay connected. Praying and reading your Bible are two other ways to stay connected. Let's do something daily to stay connected to Jesus, our main power source. Let us pray,

DEAR LORD: Help us do things each day to stay connected you, Jesus. Amen.

AND, MAY THE PEACE OF GOD WHICH PASSES ALL HUMAN UNDERSTANDING  
KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS THROUGH CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD.

Back in 2005 *The Week* magazine carried a story about a Romanian man who was recovering in the hospital after trying to escape from his wife by swinging from tree to tree on a vine like Tarzan. You see, 66 year-old Stefan Trisca had wanted to join his friends for a night of drinking, but his wife locked him in his bedroom. But, that did not stop Stefan. He was on a mission. He climbed through his bedroom window, grabbed a tree vine and managed to swing to another tree. He thought to himself, “*Great, now only 1 more tree to go.*” Only this time, he missed his mark, sending him plummeting to earth - breaking an arm, a leg, and an ankle - all this while he was sober. Imagine what could have happened had he attempted this maneuver once he had a few drinks in him. In any case, Stefan later commented, “*Swinging from tree to tree was more difficult than it looked in the Tarzan movies.* He went on to say, “*I forgot to take into account that Tarzan was a lot younger than me.*” Well, they say there’s no fool like an old fool. In any event, our lesson today from John’s Gospel is about a vine, not about the kind of vine that would be suitable for swinging.

Read again with me from this morning’s Gospel what Jesus says in verses 1 & 2: “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*” Those are powerful words and I hope you will give them your undivided attention for just a few moments. There is an important message here. “... *my Father is the vinegrower. He prunes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*” These words are directed to both churches and to individual church members. Christ is the true vine. We are the branches. **And, we have but 1 job. That is to bear fruit.** That is why we have been called together as a community. We are not here simply to enjoy one another’s company. We are here to be nourished so that we may bear fruit in our homes, in our community, and in the world for which Christ died. So, the question for the day is ...where is your fruit? Is our church a better church because you are here? Is your home a better home because you are there? Is the world a better place because you are here? Where is your fruit?

Some of us have grown “*too comfortable in Zion.*” We could be doing so much more for the sake of the Kingdom, but we have forgotten that our main task is to make a difference in the world. Our main task is to make Christ known in this community. Our main task is to help people know that they are loved. Our main task, in other words, is to bear fruit. Jesus put it as pointedly as possible. The barren tree - that is, the tree that does not bear fruit - will be thrown into the fire. That’s more vivid imagery and a little bit scary. What good is a grape vine without grapes? What use is a fig tree without figs? Tear them down, strip their branches, throw them into the flames. Nothing could be clearer than this principle: we are to bear fruit. That’s our job. Now, how do we go about doing that?

**1<sup>st</sup> of all, we produce fruit by staying connected to the vine.** Now, let’s read together what Jesus has to say in verses 4 & 5: “*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those*”

who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing." The secret to bearing fruit is staying connected to Christ. That's an important rule: If we are to bear fruit, we must stay connected to the vine which is Christ. Christ "only" is the source of our life. And, trust me, if we are going to be able to produce the fruits of the Spirit in this church at BLC/SMLC/STLC and in our lives – those fruits which Paul lists in Galatians 5:22-23 - love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – we need to stay connected to Jesus. Amen! I hope that is the primary reason you are here in worship today, to stay connected to Christ so that you can bear much fruit.

**But, there is a word of warning in this passage.** Actually, there are 2 warnings. Read verses 1 & 2 again with me please: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He **removes** every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he **prunes** to make it bear more fruit." **Jesus is talking 1st here about those who bear no fruit**, and he clearly states, **"remove"** every branch that bears no fruit. What does that mean? Deep in our hearts, we know what it means, don't we? **There are some people in every group who just aren't interested in bearing fruit.**

People who work around fruit trees or grapevines are familiar with the term "sucker shoots." Sucker shoots are branches that never bear fruit. They literally suck up the nutrients and greatly reduce the quantity and quality of fruit that the other branches need. Every group has them, including the church. **People who only take up space** - they are not really interested in bearing fruit. Even worse, **there are a few people who are actually poisonous to the group.** I understand that there is a tree that grows in countries around the Caribbean that can actually kill you. Eating its fruit brings painful suffering, sometimes death. The natives use the sap of the bark to make poison darts for hunting. It's called the Manchineel [man-chuh-nee] Tree. It produces loads of small, green, apple-looking fruit, about the size of a large crabapple. But, don't eat them! They're quite poisonous, and if ingesting the fruit doesn't kill you, you'll probably wish you were dead. And, it's not just the fruit that is toxic. It's the entire tree - roots, trunk, bark, branches, and leaves! Just standing under a Manchineel Tree can be a horrifying experience, especially if it's raining. Many seek shelter under the shady eaves of this tree, only to be drenched in drops of acidic sap dripping from the leaves. When it rains, drops that have made contact with the tree fall on the unsuspecting shade-lover. The result is severe rashes and blistering of the skin. Christopher Columbus encountered this tree and called it the Tree of Death. You don't want to have anything to do with the "tree of death."

The fact is, there are poisonous personalities in every group, including the church. These people not only don't bear fruit, they actually do enormous harm to the work of the kingdom. They love to sow dissension. They delight in passing along rumors and innuendos. They think they are harmless, but they are actually enemies of God. Use some discernment when you are around them. Make certain that you do not allow them to infect you. Be loving toward them, pray for them, treat them the way you would like to be treated. But, understand that they are misguided in their mischief. God knows their heart. God knows the kind of

fruit each of us is bearing or whether we are bearing any fruit at all. Note, Christ's words again at the first of this passage: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit..."* Again, I'm not sure what being **"removed"** means, but it sounds scary to me. Does it mean they are removed from God's love? I can't believe that. Does it mean that they are shut off from God's resources? I'm not sure, but 1 thing I know – I don't want to find out. It is unfortunate, but we have turned God into such a Santa Claus figure that the words **"removed"** are probably not in most Christians' vocabulary. And, yet, they are written here in our Gospel lesson this morning. Sucker shoots and poisonous trees had better beware. This is God you are dealing with. Where is your fruit?

**But, there is a 2<sup>nd</sup> group Christ mentions besides those who do not bear fruit.** Jesus says that God **"removes"** every branch that bears no fruit, but he adds that **"every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit."** I believe Jesus is talking about us and he seems to be saying is that even if we do bear fruit, life is not going to be a picnic. Pruning can be painful. When the owner of the vineyard prunes a vine, not only does he cut away all the dead wood. He also cuts away some of the live wood. This is a tough teaching. I don't know about you, but I don't want to look like a barren, bleeding stump. But, here's what Jesus may be saying to us. He may be saying, *"My followers will not be immune to tragedy. In fact, some of my most prized saints will experience tragedy because they ARE my followers."* Now, when tragedy comes, as it does in every life, there is little profit in asking God, *"Why did this happen to me?"* That is one question God never seems to answer. But, here is the question you should ask when tragedy strikes, *"Lord, is there some way you can use this event to prune me and cause me to bear more fruit to your glory?"* I guarantee you, that is 1 question that will always receive a positive answer. Maybe this is the difference between those who are **"removed"** and those who are **"pruned."** It never occurs to those who are **"cut off or removed"** to ask that question. They may never be interested in bearing fruit now or in the future. So, tragedy is meaningless. They may even view painful moments in life as a punishment from God. All that is left for them is to lash out at God in anger. But, the person who is able to pray in the face of great tragedy, *"Lord, is there some way you can use this event to 'prune' me and cause me to bear more fruit to your glory?"* this is the person who will find a source of strength they never dreamed possible.

So, sister and brother, I ask again, **"Where is your fruit?"** And, then, the question that goes along with that 1<sup>st</sup> question is this: **"Have you been pruned?"** It is only after we have been pruned that we can bear the most splendid fruit of all. This is what the writer of the book of James means when he writes, *"Consider it pure joy, my sisters and brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* Can you do that? Can you take any adverse trial and pray, *"Lord, is there some way you can use this event to prune me and cause me to bear more fruit to your glory?"* If you can, you are among God's elect and God will use you in a wondrous ways to work his love to make this a better world today, now, and forever more. Amen.

