

April 10, 2022; Palm Sunday; Confirmation Sunday
+ John 15:5-8 +
"Remain in Him"

"I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples."

The following is a true story: To prepare his catechumens for Confirmation Sunday, a pastor sent home with them a copy of the confessions and promises they were to make on that day. They included a confession of baptism's power, of faith in the Triune God, the divine inspiration of Scripture, and a confession that the Evangelical Lutheran Church is faithful to its teaching. It also included promises: to continue steadfast in the Word of God, to conform all of life and belief to God's Word, and, finally, to endure all things, *even death*, rather than fall away from his promises.

That night there came a phone call from a mortified parent. How dare this pastor – as if he personally had written those confessions and promises – how dare he ask wonderful, innocent adolescents to promise that they will die rather than fall away from the teaching of Christ! How morbid! And on such a happy day as Confirmation! With grandparents in attendance! When there's going to be cake! Who could want to even hear a promise so dark and scary?

One answer is: Jesus wants to hear such a promise. Not only does Jesus want this promise from all who trust in him, he demands it. Remaining in Jesus – no matter what, even no matter death – is the difference between eternal life and eternal death: **"...without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."**

If that sounds serious, it's because it is serious. Breaking our connection to Jesus results in eternal death. Which is why, on Confirmation Sunday, Jesus is listening as confirmands promise to let nothing – not even death – separate them from him. Of course it is dark thought. And of course everyone hopes it never comes to that. But followers of Christ must let nothing – ever – separate them from him.

Nothing must separate us from him, because of what we watch him do on this Palm Sunday. The King of kings rides a lowly donkey into Jerusalem, hearing praise that will quickly fade, to be replaced with cries to crucify. Jesus is the one who lowers himself to take on our humanity and live out perfection in our place. This week he lowers himself to the pain and disgrace of crucifixion to take away the sin of the world.

Nothing must separate us from him, because his holy life and sacrifice are the forgiveness of our sins. It is through faith in him that God the Father accepts us as his children, at peace with him forever.

Nothing must separate us from him, because in seven days he will rise from his grave and conquer death for us, securing our own promised resurrection on the Last Day.

Today our confirmands will confess that in baptism the Holy Spirit connected them to all of these blessings by giving them faith in Jesus. And this connection to Jesus through faith is everything: forgiveness, peace

with God, and our own resurrection to life. This is why Jesus says: **“I am the vine; you are the branches.”** Because we branches are connected to Vine, the source of life, we have life in him.

And Jesus does not leave us wondering how to remain in him: **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you...”** In baptism Jesus words of life entered your heart. Whenever you hear his gospel, they come back. And today, as we receive his Supper (some for the very first time), his words of life return as we receive his body and blood. This is how Jesus words remain in us, so that we remain in him: Scripture and sacrament.

And this is why confirmands confess not only their faith in the Triune God, the power of their baptisms, and their tenacity to remain in Christ, suffering all things, even death. They also promise to remain faithful in their use of Word and sacrament. Jesus is their Vine, their source of life eternal, and this is how they will stay in him.

Remaining in Christ has other great benefits, too. Jesus says: **“The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit.”** Since he tempted the first humans in the Garden of Eden, Satan has been telling the lie that humans can be more and have more if they break their connection to God. He told Adam and Eve that apart from God their existence would improve. He still tells the same lie. And sadly, many listen.

Many break their connection to Christ because they think they will get more out of life if they do. They will have more fun, achieve more success, or discover some new and wonderful spiritual insight. Countless confirmands have fallen for this lie and broken their connection to Jesus’ life by neglecting his words. Even those of us who are still connected to Christ fall into this trap at time. We see good times, if we only leave Jesus when we’re with our unbelieving friends. We see worldly success, if we only get greedy and do whatever it takes to get it.

This is unwise. Because apart from Christ, a person may make billions of dollars and fill their days with endless pleasures. They may grow wise in the world’s eyes, and even do many things that appear good, gaining applause from other people. But in God’s eyes, apart from Christ, it counts for nothing **“because without me you can do nothing.”**

But on the other hand, Scripture teaches that those connected to Christ please God even with the simplest and humblest works, works that may go completely unnoticed by the world. On the Last Day Jesus will commend those who were connected to him and did very simple good works: giving cups of cold water, visiting prisoners, and feeding the hungry. You see, if you’re connected to Christ, he might make you a billionaire or a thousandaire. He may give you the opportunity to feed a million or just buy a sandwich for one hungry person. But it’s all good to God, because Jesus is all good, and we’re connected to him.

Life becomes so much more joyful with that perspective! The pressure to be great in the eyes of the world is off! The demand to do every possible good thing in public so that people will notice and think you’re amazing – that goes away! **“The one who remains in me is the one who bears much fruit.”** Remain in him, and all the good things you do are pleasing to your Father, no matter how big or small they look to other people.

Also, when you remain in him you will always have a Friend to speak to: **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”** Sometimes it is hard to find anyone at all to talk to. It is even harder to find someone who understands you and actually wants to

listen to you. But those connected to Jesus always have a friend like that. You can talk to him always and anywhere because you're connected to him by faith. And he really does understand you completely; he took on our humanity to win life for us. So he knows suffering and pain, hunger and thirst, friendship and betrayal. Whatever you go through, he relates. When he listens to you, he will give you everything you ask for that he has promised you.

So: not only does our Vine give us life forever, he also gives us the ability to please God and to speak to God as our friend. And all of this is for God's glory: **"My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples."** Jesus is speaking these words the night before he dies. On that night, he speaks a lot about glory. Staying connected to Christ is our key to glorifying God. Whenever a sinner trusts in Jesus, God gets the glory of another soul saved. And then, every time that believer does good in Jesus' name, God gets the glory of good work done in his service. Every time a branch in the Vine turns to him in prayer, that is to his glory, too. God created us in the first place to love him and glorify him. In the Vine, we can and do give him glory.

So today confessions and promises will be made. If you are making them today, speak them from your heart. If you spoke them decades ago before an altar far from here, listen carefully and remember that day. We are baptized into Jesus Christ. We believe in the one true and Triune God. We trust the truth of his Word. Now, remain in your Savior by remaining in his Word. Keep your promise to use Scripture and sacrament faithfully, to remain a branch in the Vine.

In that Vine you have life forever, because you have the holiness and forgiveness of sins that Jesus rides into Jerusalem to win for you. In that Vine you can and do bear fruit that pleases your Father. In him you have a Friend who gets you, listens to you, and answers you. In him you give glory to God. Let nothing, not even death, separate you from him. Remain in him. Amen.