

Fifth Sunday of Easter; April 28, 2024

Acts 4:32-37

“Jesus is Life for Lives of Love”

The whole group of believers was one in heart and soul. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they held everything in common. The apostles continued to testify about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ with great power, and abundant grace was on all of them. There was not a needy person among them. For from time to time those who were owners of lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds received from what was sold, and laid it at the apostles’ feet. It was distributed to each one according to what anyone needed.

Joseph, who was called Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated “son of encouragement”), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him. He brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

If you are a living branch connected to a living vine, what will you do? What will you do without being scolded or shamed, but naturally, by virtue of the fact that you are a living branch connected to a living vine? You will bear fruit.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus makes clear that no one disconnected from him has his life, or the ability to bear fruit that pleases the Father. But then there’s you and I, the branches that are connected to Jesus, the vine. The Spirit has connected us to him by faith, and now Jesus is our life. His holy life is ours. His death on the cross is our promise of life in heaven. His return to life on Easter is ours, too. Jesus is life through and through. And through faith in him, all that life is ours. We are the branches, he is our vine, our life. In him, we live and will live forever.

We are still sinful branches, no doubt. But Jesus tells us we have this going for us, too: because we are in Jesus, the Father keeps working on us. He keeps working on us, pruning us so we bear more fruit, better fruit all the time. Every time we receive Jesus’ life in Word and sacrament, our connection to him is made stronger and stronger, so we bear more and more, better and better fruit.

Fruit is pretty and sweet. It is pleasing to our Father. Whenever we branches who draw life from Jesus show that life by producing fruit, it is sweet, pretty, and pleasing to God. Not only that, fruit is proof of life. When we produce it, we show God and those around us: Jesus is my life. I am a branch in the vine.

But what fruit do the branches produce? St. Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit, and love heads the list. In the letter of St. John we heard earlier, he also makes it clear that love is first of all the fruits. And he also makes clear a couple other truths this fruit of love, sweet and pleasing to Father. One: The fruit of love will show itself with action, not words alone. And two: Christians will bear this fruit especially to each other.

We must take all of that with us to the verses for this sermon. We hear a description of life in the early Christian Church in Jerusalem. “Early” is a relative term. This is the extremely early Christian Church, the first generation. They are branches in the vine. They have life from Jesus. And they show it by bearing fruit, especially the fruit of love, especially love in action, especially toward their fellow Christians.

These Christians showed the love of Christ to each other with their thoughts and their words. They had a strange idea in their minds – an idea that proved they were in Christ: nothing they owned was actually

theirs. It all came from God, so even though their names were on their possessions, they all belonged to God. **No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own...** How else did their thoughts bear the fruit of love? **The whole group of believers was one in heart and soul.** "Heart" is about effort, the mission of the Church. "Soul" is about belief. They were unified in what they wanted to achieve because they were unified in their faith. And here we also see that mission of the Church: to proclaim faithfully the belief, the truth of the Christian faith: **The apostles continued to testify about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ with great power, and abundant grace was on all of them.** Christians, especially those called to lead the Church, proclaim their faith to each other, to build each other up in God's grace.

These branches showed their connection to Christ by the way they thought – selfless with possessions, one in heart and soul – and the way they spoke God's truth to each other. But their loving words didn't stop there: **Joseph, who was called Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated "son of encouragement"), a Levite, a native of Cyprus..** Jesus' apostles needed encouragement as they proclaimed the good news of Jesus' grace. It's hard, and people don't always listen. Sometimes preachers can wonder if anyone's listening at all. Joseph encouraged them, so much so that he became known for it and they gave him a wonderful nickname.

So these Christians showed their connection to Christ with their thoughts: a selfless attitude with their possessions, unity of belief and mission. They showed it with their words: proclaiming the grace of Jesus and encouraging each other. But remember St. John's focus on love through action. It was one thing for these Christians to consider their possessions not their own. But they proved they thought way by providing generously for everyone in need: **No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they held everything in common...There was not a needy person among them. For from time to time those who were owners of lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds received from what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet. It was distributed to each one according to what anyone needed. Joseph...sold a field that belong to him. He brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.**

Now you may be expecting me to turn the mirror of God's law on you something like this: Jesus says we branches will show that we are in him by producing God-pleasing fruit. John says the greatest of all is love, which shows itself in the way we think, speak, and especially in what we do for others. That's what the early Christians did, and that's what you lousy sinners need to start doing because you're not. I am sorry to disappoint you if that's what you're expecting. For some congregations, that would be the way to go. But not so much with this one. Trinity Lutheran is a fine example – not perfect, by any stretch – but a fine example of a group of Christians who show their connection to Jesus in the way they think. For the most part, you do not think of what you have first as your own, but as God's. For the most part, you hold with one mind to the truth of God's Word. People ask questions but do not challenge God's Word. For the most part, you also know that your mission as a church is to proclaim the grace of Jesus Christ. Not only that, but you are also mostly encouraging, and actively work to make sure anyone in need in this congregation has their needs met.

All of that is true, so I will only say: more and more. We are never perfect in these things. We always need to grow stronger in our connection to Jesus by growing in faith. We need the Father to prune us so that we will become even more fruitful. We need to grow in Jesus by listening to his Word, especially the good news of his salvation. We need to grow through his Supper, and through baptism's water, so that we produce even bigger and better fruit for the Father.

And although this group is exemplary, we do need forgiveness for our failures to produce that fruit, especially the fruit of active love for each other. Scripture says that anyone who keeps the law and yet stumbles in just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. Exemplary is not perfect, and we are thoroughly guilty sinners if we fail even once to think, speak, and act in love. But look again at the heart and soul of those early Christians. It is still our heart and soul: that Christ Jesus is the righteousness of sinners, who died to make us his own and rose because God has declared us righteous. What the apostles testified to in that church is still what the Spirit testifies to in this church, so that the abundant grace of God is on us all of us, too.

As we grow stronger in our vine and love more and more, we should also note this: God wants us to love all people, but his direction is for Christians especially to love one another first and foremost. Jesus explains that this is the most powerful way for the unbelieving world to see that we have the love of God in us. By loving each other, we show all people that we are Jesus' disciples. We also start by loving one another most of all because we have the best thing in common: our connection to Jesus and his love. I don't know about you, but sometimes it's easier for me to love an unbeliever than it is to love a fellow Christian, especially a fellow Christian I know. Because if I knew them, I would have probably seen their hypocritical lack of love. And if I know them, I can easily take them for granted. We need to start with love for each other. That starts with knowing each other – each other's names, each other's strengths and weaknesses, and, especially if we are going to love each other with action, each other's needs. Start here with your love in Christ.

He is your life. He is your righteousness, your forgiveness, your resurrection to eternal life. Love in thought, in word, and most of all in deed. As you have, more and more, and most of all for each other. Amen.