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The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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The Living Savior Produces Love in His People

Even before his death and resurrection, the lives of the people who followed Jesus changed. He offered a model of love, of course, but he offered more. Just as a vine gives power to its branches to bear fruit, so Jesus is a spiritual power source who produces willing and eager obedience in his followers. Jesus says in today's Gospel, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."

Sermon

Acts 4:32-37

³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

"Live Uncommon"

Last week was Good Shepherd Sunday, and Pastor Tiefel preached on how by laying down his life, our shepherd Jesus has united us as one flock underneath him. In that text, Jesus emphasized his protection and sacrifice and guidance. This Sunday, Jesus gives us another analogy for his relationship with us: instead of the Shepherd with his sheep, he is the Vine with his branches. And while both analogies express the beautiful unity we have with Christ, the Gospel reading today introduces a new emphasis: Now that he's made us one flock under him, although our side of the relationship at its core is simply receiving his blessings and listening to his voice, we are not merely a group of passive ovine spectators. Connected by faith alone to our life-source, the Vine, we now produce fruit.

Now, make sure you heard me right. This is not, "*supposed to grow fruit.*" This is not, "*should probably produce fruit.*" A branch connected to the Vine *produces fruit*, and someone connected by faith to Christ produces fruit (v5). (If *there's no fruit*, well that means there must be no connection to the Vine—no faith.) Jesus is emphasizing this aspect to the Christian life: that although we are saved by faith alone, faith that saves never remains alone. (And just in case that raises anyone's Lutheran spidey-senses, realize that is straight out of Art. III of the Lutheran Formula of Concord!)

This picture Jesus uses is nothing new to the Scriptures. It was a common Old Testament picture that Israel was supposed to be like a vineyard that, because of their trust in the goodness of God, produced fruits of justice and righteousness—standing out among the landscape around them. The problem is that when God as the gardener looked for that kind of fruit, it's not what he found. And so the Old Testament prophets lay into Israel—exposing the people's greed, the ways they contributed to and benefited from systemic social injustices, and the ways

they thought they could have the best of both worlds by prostituting themselves to the gods, values, and ideologies of the cultures around them. *Oh, they still went to church*—most were incredibly dedicated and religious—but the hypocrisy of it all almost made the sin stink ever worse to God.

It is so refreshing, then, when you move from how the prophets describe Old Testament Israel to how Luke describes the New Testament church in Acts 4! Finally, motivated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, God's people are producing the types of fruit the Gardener has been looking for—particularly in how they shared their own possessions and property (*with which they likely had strong emotional ties!*) with those in need. The people were *always* to live so uncommonly that the cultures around them took notice and saw behind their radically loving way of life was a radically loving God, and now it was happening! And this wasn't just a fluke, it continued on—Tertullian wrote in about 200 AD about how the pagans were just struck by the radical love and sacrifice of Christians, and how they would sing about us: "*Oh, how they love! Oh, how they care! Not just for their own, but for anyone and everyone in need, they are willing to die! Oh, how they love.*"

But I wonder, brothers and sisters, whether they're singing about us in 2024 like they did in the year 200. And I don't think the changing factor is strictly a *them-thing*; I wonder how much of it is an *us-thing*. *What are we known for?*

Listen, it's good to have a strong sense of morality—God certainly does! But it's the easy thing to complain about an immoral society around us; it's not as easy to go out and actively love an immoral society around us. One you can do from your couch, one involves getting out, getting uncomfortable with self-sacrifice and work.

Oh, but we love to go to church! Again, a great quality for a Christian! But the thing is, many people think that *that* is the thing that makes them uniquely Christian in this world—that they go to church—and quite frankly, that is not how the Bible talks. Our second reading started off: "*Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*" Our faith is strengthened here as we're assured that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus alone, but then that faith that saves never remains alone—it produces fruit all throughout the week as we live radically uncommon lives: our hospitality to friends, family, and enemies; our reactions to controversy; the ways we steward our possessions. We shouldn't be anomalies and weirdoes in our culture simply because we go to church, but because what we hear at church empowers us to love in ways that people just aren't supposed to love according to the rules of the world.

I saw something once that just broke my heart. A girl that I went to Christian grade school with, got confirmed with, went to church with wrote a post online. It was all about how she was so thankful for the loving community she was finally able to find in... the gay community. There wasn't even any mention of bitterness towards the church for (*rightfully!*) condemning the sinful lifestyle... it was all simply about the love, listening, generosity, support... *a whole list* of ways these people showed her radical love. Meanwhile, while she was in her church community, her dad had died and hardly anyone did a thing for them.

Now, I know there's more factors to this conversation—and this has *nothing remotely* to do with accepting sinful lifestyles—but do you know how many people like this girl would say they aren't Christians, not necessarily because of *Christ*, but because they're fed up with *Christians*? People are sick of the hypocrisy! We wonder why so few young people are in the church...? This is probably a big part of it! If someone sees *more* support and generosity in the community down the street that's not even connected to the Vine, and *more* brokenness and betrayal in their church community that *is* connected to the Vine, then we ought to be ashamed of ourselves and ask for God's mercy.

Now, Acts 4 is *descriptive* of what fruits of faith looked like for that specific church community in that specific context. It's not *prescriptive*, that, unless your church looks exactly like this, then you're not real Christians. But... imagine *if* people saw in our churches what Acts 4 describes more often. Imagine that testimony to the world! That, to act like this, we must be connected to an *entirely different* sort of life-source—a life-source worth looking into.

So—what are we supposed to do? How do we branches produce more fruit?

Well, Jesus talks about pruning—the painful process of cutting off parts of our life that are keeping us from producing fruit like we otherwise could. And he can do this—he can allow difficulty or even tragedy, he can

allow drastic changes... whatever it takes to focus us on what's really important in life. But that's not how he prefers to do things— that's the work of his *law*, his foreign/strange work. Verse 33 says that “[God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that they \[went on to live so radically...\]](#).” He prefers to work through his *gospel*—his message of grace.

Jesus is all the things we haven't seen in ourselves or others.

Even though mankind returned little more to their gardening God than dead dirt and withering leaves, God had a plan to recover his vineyard. Hidden with the Father from all eternity was his chosen Seed—a Vine that would shoot forth from the stump of Jesse. He planted this chosen Seed in the virgin soil of a young woman from the line of David named Mary. And after growing up before the Lord like a root out of dry ground—from the most unexpected of places—he announced, “*I am the true vine.*” And with his powerful Word, he worked faith in people's hearts, attaching them to himself as branches to the Vine. And although those who refused him tore off the bark of his skin with whips and thorns before nailing him to a lifeless tree trunk, this Vine had divine roots and could not stay dead. Just as he miraculously germinated to life in a virgin's womb, he miraculously resurrected to life in a garden tomb. In doing so, what was true of the Vine became true for all of his branches connected to him by faith, and he floods grace and forgiveness into you like life-giving sap. He cleanses us of all our selfishness and religiosity, and empowers us by his Spirit to produce fruit.

That's what verse 33 is all about when it says that “[God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that they \[went on to live so radically...\]](#).” The way you see the world leads to how you live in the world. On Easter morning, a vine of the New Creation sprouted among the Old Creation—the reality of future undying love, peace, and prosperity walking around preaching to a world still broken. And he called his branches to have a faith that acted like the same thing was true for them. Having seen in our Savior that our sovereign, powerful, loving God is *for us*, we don't have to live in this world with a scarcity mindset, watching out primarily for me and my own and holding on to everything God has blessed me with as if it's my own. We can be branches producing fruit from a mindset of abundance, like the New Creation already came when Christ rose from the dead.

When I drive onto the Concordia campus to do campus ministry work, I always notice the banners they have hanging on the light posts, and they remind me of Acts 4. They say, “*Live Uncommon.*” May God's grace be so powerfully at work in you that you *live uncommonly* in this world, giving glory to God in your radical contentment, generosity, and kindness. Because people are watching. Our kids are watching. And although one day they may be singing, “Oh, how they love!” The next, God-willing, they'll be singing alongside us, “Oh, how He loves! Oh, how I'm loved!”

The sermon was preached by Vicar Micah Otto.