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Jesus is the True Vine

(Holding up a phone)

Are you connected?

These little things are incredible. So much information in the palm of your hand. The ability to connect with people across the globe in a split second. Technology has advanced rapidly in the past 50 years and now our world is as connected as it has ever been. Kids are starting to get smartphones at the age of ten. It is almost impossible to find someone who doesn't always have one of these in their pockets. Maybe some of you old fashioned people have stuck it out with a flip phone. But for the most part, smartphones are everywhere.

We use this technology to stay connected to many different things. We stay connected with what is going on in the political world with the news. We get to watch and stay up to date with updates in the sports world. We can connect with family members that we don't get to see very often through texting, phone calls, or zoom meetings. God has certainly blessed our age with all this technology.

Connections can be harmful. You can be connected to things that can destroy you. Addictions to drugs and alcohol can ruin people's lives. Being overly connected to the news can depress us as so often the news is filled with horribly sad tragedies. We have firsthand experience with this, the constant political unrest of the last year, the bombardment of Covid news. Connections to the wrong things can do a lot of damage.

In our Gospel for today, we hear of a connection that surpasses all others. A connection that brings us nutrients to produce fruit, a connection that brings us life, a connection that you have. You are connected to Jesus.

Let's go back to the night before Jesus' death. Christ and his disciples had just finished eating the Lord's Supper in the upper room on Thursday night of Holy Week. They had finished dinner by singing a hymn and now it was time to walk over to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

Jesus knew that the time of his death was coming very soon, and he knew that his disciples needed some encouragement. They needed some words that would stay with them and so as they were on their way, Jesus may have seen a vineyard or some vines and it causes him to speak the words we just read.

Vines and vineyards are all over the place in the Mediterranean landscape. Grapes are one of the cash crops for that region of the world and it was common to see them on the side of the road. When they passed some vines, the view leads him to say, "I am the True Vine, and my Father is the Gardener. He cuts off all branches in me that are not bearing fruit and all that does bear fruit he prunes in order that they may bear more fruit." (NIV 84)

Growing up, my siblings and I would often go over to my grandparents' house while my parents were working. In the backyard of my grandparents' house is a clothesline on which some grapevines would grow and a garden full of different plants. They make their own jelly and wine from the grapes that grow.

Keeping up with a garden is a lot of work and you need to stay on top of it if you want the plants to produce fruit. When I was young, I didn't understand how much work it takes. I figured you just planted the seeds and let the plant be and eventually the plant would give some fruit. I didn't realize that pruning, weeding, and trimming are all necessary. I figured that cutting off branches hurt the tree. I mean if there are less branches, then there is less fruit, right?

But that is not the case at all. If you leave the tree, bush, or vine alone, they won't produce like you want them to. Weeds pop up. Non-fruit bearing branches grow. And smaller branches begin to sprout off the good branches. These excess growths or "suckers" literally suck the nutrients away from the branches that would bear fruit and if the excess growths aren't dealt with, the healthy branch will no longer produce fruit.

So, my grandpa would go out, pick out the weeds, cut off the branches that weren't bearing fruit, and prune the excess branches that began to sprout. He needed to cut off the things that were not truly connected to the vine because without the true connection, the nutrients could not get to the branches to produce fruit.

Our Father planted a Garden back at the creation of the world. It was beautiful. It was lush. It was perfect. But it did not last. Adam and Eve fell, and the Gardener's paradise was lost. The beauty turned hideous. Lush plants turned dry and barren. Perfection turned into sin. Sin attached itself like a cancer on our bodies, sucking all the nutrients out of our bodies and leading us down into the eternal fires of hell. And we could do nothing to fix it. We were branches connected to sin, connected to something that supplied no nutrients, only a lethal poison.

God specifically chose a nation through whom salvation from this deadly disease would come. He gave them the promised land and set them up for success, but the curse was still there. This chosen people allowed suckers to grow and separated themselves from their God by worshipping idols. They separated themselves from their life source.

Isaiah describes this when he writes, "My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest of vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit." (Isaiah 5 NIV)

We, just like the Israelites, let those suckers, those excess branches, those weeds grow. They are like those little thoughts that pop up and you know you should cut them off right then and there and you want to push them away, but they slowly get closer. "It's just one more drink." "We are getting married in a few months, so it's alright if we live together." "I went to church last week; I will just make sure I go next week." And before you know it those little thoughts have sprouted and become sin.

God did not give up on his garden. God did not give up on the Israelites. God did not give up on you. He planned to save the world and that is what he did. In his love, God provided a new clean vine to sprout from Jesse's stump. Isaiah also prophesied about this. "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." Jesus Christ is that shoot. We are connected to the Son of God himself and not like an excess branch which sucks away the nutrients. We are branches cleaned and pruned by the Gardener himself.

Christ said to his disciples, "Already you are clean because of the words which I spoke to you." These words are for us as well. Christ gives this promise to us right here in this book. Through the means of grace: The Word and Sacrament, God nourishes our souls and cleanses us from sin.

In Baptism, he cut off the Old Adam in you and claimed you as his own. Through the working of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, you are cleansed, and new life has sprouted inside of you.

Earlier that night before Jesus said these words to the disciples, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper where we taste his forgiveness in the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are connected to the shoot from Jesse's stump. We are connected to the true source of life. We are connected to Jesus the true vine. Clean and pruned branches.

What do clean and pruned branches connected to the true vine do? They produce abundant fruit, not because it earns them anything but because that is what they naturally do as clean and pruned branches. "I am the vine, and you are the branches. The one remaining in me and I in him, this one bears much fruit." Branches that are connected produce fruit. And that is what you are. You are connected branches that produce fruit.

We produce fruit naturally to give glory to God our Father. Jesus says, "In bearing fruit, my father is glorified." That is all the gardener wants. The gardener wants his plants to produce fruit not because it has to but because it is in its nature to produce fruit.

A young father receives a fingerpainting from his 3-year-old son and he adores it. Not because the painting is any good, but because that painting was given to him by his son who loves him. This is how our Father sees our fruit. Not as anything good but he adores them because they are done out of love for the Father.

What is this fruit that we produce? They are the good works that flow from a heart of faith. They are works done not to earn our salvation or become a better person. Both of those are impossible on our own. These fruits are works done out of love for the God who gave everything for us. Galatians 5 shows us what they look like, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." These fruits are produced when the Word of Christ, the nutrient for our faith, is flowing through you.

James lets us know that faith without works is dead. "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." This is not a threat but a wonderful encouragement. Be who you are! Produce fruit! These fruits are the evidence of our faith. They are the way that we are proved to be Jesus' disciples. It is in faith's nature to produce these fruits of the Spirit. In the same way that a healthy branch naturally produces fruit. This is who you are. Produce fruit!

We are connected and remain connected by reading his Word and learning from what he tells us. His Spirit gives us the strength to avoid those nutrient sucking connections which try to latch on to us and overtake us. With Christ, we can say no to the prowling lion who is looking to devour us. We can see through the lies which he whispers into our ears. We can put aside those temptations which sprout in our daily lives.

When we are truly connected with Christ, another amazing blessing flows. "If you remain in me and my words in you that which you wish, ask, and it will be for you." This doesn't mean that God's word is a magic genie's lamp that we can rub and get three wishes from. Jesus is saying that when we are connected with him that means we have the same will as Christ. A branch and the vine that it is connected to, both want the same thing. They want to produce fruit. What God wants is the same as what we want. We can approach God in prayer and know with confidence that he will hear us, that he will answer us, he will do what is best for our eternal good.

Connections are a wonderful gift from God. Nothing beats catching up with an old friend after many years apart. Staying connected to your community is a great way to meet new people. But there is one connection that surpasses all other connections. The connection you have with your Savior. The connection that makes you a child of God. A connection that provides you the strength to live a life full of fruit. A connection that provides confidence in prayer.

Phones are a pretty cool way to stay connected with those we love. Don't forget to remain connected to the one who loves you more than anyone in all creation. (Holding up a Bible) Let these words remain with you as an encouragement the same way Jesus used them to encourage his disciples before his death. Remain in him as he remains in you. You are connected to Jesus the true vine, so bear fruit. Amen.