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 St. Mark Lutheran Church, Lindenhurst, Illinois
 The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 September 25/26, 2021

“The True Vine”

Gospel Lesson – John 15:1-13

¹ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is such a privilege to be here with you this weekend to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of St. Mark Lutheran Church. When Lisa and I walked in the door, it was like we were coming home. Everything seemed so familiar. There was the fellowship hall, where we had a lot of great potluck dinners. There was the narthex, where we had a lot of great conversations. There was the hallway outside the nursery, where a little Cub Scout once threw up on my shoes.

It seems like just yesterday that Lisa and I were worshiping here with you at St. Mark. But we’ve actually been gone now for four and a half years! Can you believe it? A lot of things have changed in our lives during that time. We’ve added six more grandchildren since we moved. There are now a **lot** of babies around the house when our family gets together! We’ve also lost some loved ones. Lisa lost her mother to cancer three years ago. And we lost one of our grandsons a couple of years ago. He passed away shortly after he was born.

And things have changed here, too. You guys have all gotten a little bit older, even though Lisa and I have stayed **exactly** the same. I see some new faces here, and that’s awesome. But there are also some faces that are missing. I miss seeing Eleanor Magera right

there, and Lou Korom over there, and Norb Pischke over there. Time does march on, doesn't it? People and things do change.

But there are a **couple** of people who don't really seem to change very much over time. I'm talking, of course, about my good old Uncle Ole and his faithful wife, my Aunt Lena. They've pretty much stayed the same.

They did have a little fun this summer. They went on a short vacation to Iowa. Ole wanted to see the famous Norwegian American Heritage Museum in the fine city of Decorah. So they went down there for a weekend. And when they got up on Sunday morning, Lena said, "You know, Ole, we should try to find a church to go to." Ole said, "I don't really feel like it, Lena. We're on vacation." Lena said, "Yes, we are on vacation. And we're gonna go to church on our vacation." Ole said, "Okay."

So they got dressed and got in the car and they went looking for a church. They pulled up to one big Church, with cars all around. Ole said, "Lena, you wait here in the car. I'll run in and see if this is the Church for us." So he went in, and in a couple of minutes he came back out and got in the car. Lena said, "Is this the Church for us?" Ole said, "No, this one's not for us. There were statues everywhere and there was some smoke in the air. And people were putting their hands in a big bowl of water by the door. Let's just find another Church."

So they drove to another Church and, again, Ole went in to check it out. A couple of minutes later, he came back out and got in the car. Lena said, "Is this the Church for us?" Ole said, "No, this isn't the one. In this Church, people were shouting and waving their hands. And they even had a band up front, playing some kind of rock & roll music. Let's find another Church."

So they drove down the street until they found another one. And once again, Ole went inside. About a minute later, he came running out, waving at Lena. He said, "Come on, Lena, this is the Church!" Lena said, "How do you know?" And Ole said, "Because as soon as I walked in the door, the whole congregation stood up and started singing, 'Ole, Ole, Ole, Lord God Almighty!'"

I think Ole had the wrong idea about what a church is supposed to be. But in Ole's defense, it's a wrong idea that a **lot** of people have. You know, we all have our own likes and dislikes, our own preferred worship styles. And sometimes we can get caught up in thinking that the church is really about **us**, that the church exists to meet **my** needs.

But on this 60th anniversary of St. Mark Lutheran Church, in Lindenhurst, Illinois, I want to remind all of us that there is really only one thing that the church is about. There is only one **person** who is at the heart of everything that we think and say and do in the church. That one person, of course, is Jesus Christ.

The title of my sermon this evening/morning is **The True Vine**. That's what Jesus calls himself in our Gospel reading for tonight/this morning. It is a powerful image that I want to explore with you for these next few minutes. Because that image of the vine really tells us everything that we need to know about how to make sure that this church will survive and thrive beyond this 60th anniversary, to the 75th and the 100th and the 200th anniversary, and right up until the day that this world comes to an end and we are all worshipping Jesus face to face in Heaven.

So let's take a look at these verses and see what they have to say to us as we celebrate this anniversary today. Let's begin by talking about,

I. The Vine

In John 15:1, Jesus says, “I am the true vine.” This is one of what are called the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. And every one of these statements gives us some important insight into the nature and mission of Jesus. So what is Jesus trying to tell us when he says, “I am the true vine?”

To answer that question, we have to go back to the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the image of the vine was used to describe the nation of Israel. A good example is found in Psalm 80:8, where it says, “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.”

The vine that God brought out of Egypt was Israel. And then God cleared the Baal-worshiping Canaanite nations out of the Promised Land. And that’s where he planted his vine, his people. And God intended that his people, the Israelites, would be a vine that would produce good fruit, good grapes. Those good grapes would be their faithfulness to God, which would be evident in their righteous living.

The idea was that the surrounding nations would see the righteousness of Israel and they would be drawn to it, like moths to a flame. Then they would come to know the God of Israel, the one and only God of the universe, and they would be saved. The people of Israel were very proud of this calling. In fact, at the time of Jesus, there was, above the entrance to the Temple building in Jerusalem, a giant, sprawling, solid gold grapevine. It was there to remind the Jewish people of their calling to be witnesses to the whole world about the glory of their God.

But there was a problem with the grapevine image. The problem was that, at many times in their history, the majority of the people of Israel, along with their leaders, were unfaithful to the God who had planted them, the God who had given them life. In Isaiah 5, the prophet Isaiah describes the people of Israel in *his* day as a vineyard that was producing “sour grapes.” Some of them were worshiping the false gods of the surrounding nations. Some of them were worshiping no gods at all. They were just living for themselves.

And then, when we get to New Testament times, to the time of Jesus, we see the greatest rebellion of all, the most sour of all the grapes. We see the religious leaders of Israel, the ones who were supposed to be the guardians of the faith, rejecting the Son of God himself. In fact, at the very moment, when Jesus was speaking these words at the Last Supper, those religious leaders were conspiring with Judas, the betrayer. They were making plans to put Jesus to death on the cross.

So what did God do when the old vine of Israel produced sour grapes? The Bible says that God took a single branch from that vine and he replanted it. He started a new vineyard. The *great* prophet Jeremiah calls this single branch “The Righteous Branch.” And that Righteous Branch, of course, was Jesus.

Jesus was a descendant of David through his mother Mary, so he was connected to the old vine of Israel. But he was also the Son of God who, by his own life, and death, and resurrection, planted a new vineyard for God. This new vineyard came to be known as the Christian Church.

So Jesus, on the night before his crucifixion, said to the eleven disciples who were still with him in the upper room, “I am the *true* vine.” God’s Word of Life would no longer flow through the nation of Israel, and through its Temple, and through its priests. Now, the promise

of the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life in Heaven, and all of the other promises of God, would come from only one source. They would come through Jesus Christ alone.

Some of you might remember the day when I was installed here at St. Mark, in November of 2007. We were in a different Lutheran denomination at that time, and the person who installed me was the Bishop of our Synod, within that denomination. But the Bishop had his own agenda on that day, something other than just my installation.

You see, the Bishop knew that St. Mark had some real concerns about the direction that our denomination seemed to be going in. In fact, those concerns would cause us to leave that denomination about two and a half years later and join the LCMC.

So when the Bishop came to install me, he also asked if he could preach. And his sermon that day was on this text from John 15. He talked about how important it was for the branches of the church, the local congregations, to stay connected to the vine, which he defined as the larger church, the denomination.

It was a pretty stunning misinterpretation of this metaphor. And to your credit, you all knew that it was wrong. When we had the potluck after worship, several of you came up to me and asked, "Was the Bishop really trying to say that the vine is the denomination?"

You guys were really on the ball. And that was one of the things that told me that this was a special congregation. You knew that no human institution could ever be the source of life for our congregation. You knew that when Jesus said, "I am the true vine," he was talking **only** about himself. And you knew that no church could ever be a strong church if the members were not personally connected to, and personally devoted to, Jesus Christ.

So that's the first part of the metaphor, ***The Vine***. And then the second part of the metaphor is,

II. The Vinedresser

In John 15:1, Jesus says, "My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

On one of my trips to South Africa with Bob Yarbrough, I had the opportunity to tour the Groot Constantia winery and vineyards, near Cape Town. It is the oldest winery in South Africa. It was planted by Dutch settlers in the year 1685.

I really enjoy wine, and I love learning about the winemaking process. One of the things that I asked the guide on the tour was how they prune the thousands of grapevines on the estate. You see, when the grapevines are in their dormant phase, you have to cut away all of the dead wood and all of the small, unproductive branches. You have to do this so that, when the vines start to wake up in the spring, the good, strong branches can get all the nutrients that they need, in order to produce the large, full grapes that they want for their wines.

I asked the guide if they had a machine to do the work. He said that they do have a machine to do the first part of the work, cutting the thickest of the dead wood. But the fine pruning work is still done by hand. Teams of pruners spend weeks going through every row and pruning every single vine. It's the most time-consuming and the most expensive part of the winemaking process.

So what does the Father, the vinedresser, do with this vineyard that is called the Christian Church? Well, he does exactly the same thing that the vinedressers at Groot Constantia do. He does the slow, personal work of pruning every branch in the vineyard.

And that brings us to the third part of this vineyard metaphor that Jesus is using in John 15. The third part is,

III. The Branches

Now, you can probably guess who the branches are in this metaphor. They are, of course, **us**. They are you and me. In verse 3 of our text, Jesus says to the disciples who are with him in the upper room, “Already you are clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you.” Those eleven had heard what Jesus said and they had believed it. And because they believed in Jesus, their sins were forgiven. They were washed clean.

And the same is true for every person who has **faith**. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross. If you have faith, you are a branch of the true vine. You have the lifeblood of Jesus flowing through you. You have the promise of eternal life in Heaven.

But in order to hold on to this promise of eternal life, you have to stay connected to the Vine. Jesus says, in verse 4, “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” The life is in the vine—it’s in Jesus. And if you cut yourself off from Jesus, your life loses all meaning and purpose.

It reminds me of the time when my good old Uncle Ole and his good buddy Sven flew out to Las Vegas, Nevada, to attend the national Sons of Norway convention. The convention is always held in January. And they like to hold it in some warm place, so that the guys from Minnesota can get away from the cold for a week.

Well, it was the first time that Ole and Sven had ever been to Vegas. So they were really excited. They got to their hotel, and they got settled into their room, and then they decided to go downstairs and check out the casino.

They sat down next to each other, at two slot machines. Sven was doing alright, so he was having fun. But Ole wasn’t doing too well, so he got bored. He said, “Ya know what, Sven, I’m gonna go walk around for a while.”

Well, after about an hour, Sven realized that Ole had never come back. So he went looking for him. He searched for about twenty minutes before he finally found Ole out in the lobby, standing in front of a Coke machine. And Ole had about fifty bottles of Coke piled up next to him on the floor.

Sven said, “Ole, where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you! And why do you have all of those bottles of Coke on the floor next to you?” Ole didn’t even turn to look at Sven. He just said, “Quit asking so many questions. And go get me some more quarters. I’m on a winning streak!”

That’s what life is like when you are disconnected from Jesus. Your life is filled with lots of false excitement and furious activity—that accomplishes **nothing**.

That’s what Jesus is saying in verse 5 of our text. This was my Confirmation verse, given to me by my pastor more than 46 years ago. I had to sit down and have an interview with my pastor, just like Pastor Breum interviews all of the Confirmation students here at St. Mark.

My pastor said to me, “Bill, God has given you many gifts. In fact, I think you have the gifts to become a pastor. So you should think about that. But whatever you decide to do in life, remember that it won’t have any real value at all unless you do it for Jesus.”

Then he gave me my verse, John 15:5, which says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

And ever since that day, God the Father, the vinedresser, has been working on me. He has been constantly pruning me. He won’t leave me alone. And some of that pruning has been very painful.

Most of you know that, about a year after I was given that Confirmation verse, when I was just 14 years old, my dad died of cancer. He was just 39 years old. I watched him wither away from being a big powerful man, 6’ 6” and 230 pounds, to being just 90 pounds before he died. And I watched God use that cancer to do some extreme pruning in his life.

At the time that my dad was diagnosed, he was in complete rebellion against God. But just two months before he died, when all of his pride and self-confidence was pruned away, I saw him repent of his sins, and give his heart to Jesus Christ, and be saved.

And as God was pruning my dad, he was also pruning me. I learned some hard lessons during that time. But they were very important lessons. First, I learned that our time on this earth is very short. There is no guarantee that I will even live to see tomorrow. So I need to be connected to Jesus right now—today.

And a second thing that I learned from watching my dad die, was that as long as a rebellious person has breath in his body, he can still have a change of heart and be saved. In the 34 plus years that I have been in the ministry, I have never felt burned out. The fire is still strong inside of me, because I know that there are so many people who need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And I want to be an instrument of God to reach some of those people.

That is the whole point of being a branch in the vineyard of God. The fourth and final point that I want to make today, as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of St. Mark Lutheran Church, is that there is a **purpose** to all of the activity that we engage in as members of the Christian Church.

We’ve talked about the Vine, who is Jesus. We’ve talked about the Vinedresser, who is the Father. And we’ve talked about the Branches, who are us. And now, here is the purpose of this whole vineyard.

IV. The Purpose Is To Bear Fruit

Jesus says, in verse 8 of our text, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

When we bear fruit in the vineyard of God, the world will sit up and take notice. Jesus says it this way in the Sermon on the Mount: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

And what is the good work that we are called to do? What is the good work that will bring glory to our Father in heaven? Jesus tells us in verses 12-13 of our text. He says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus gave his life for us on the cross. And now he wants us to give our lives to each other, by loving each other as he first loved us.

In 2010, Mike Mol, Jessica Schranz, and I took a group of 27 young people on a Mission Trip to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Lame Deer, Montana. We went on several mission trips during the years that I was at St. Mark. And we had great kids on all of those trips. But there was something a little extra special about the kids who were on that trip in 2010.

Part of what made that trip special was that there was no cell phone service on the reservation. So the kids were cut off from phones, and TV, and the internet, for an entire week. But they didn't complain. Instead, they really got into serving the people on the reservation. And they really got into loving the other young people that they were working with.

Every night, after all of the activities were over, we would have what was called "church time." Each of the six or seven church groups that were there that week would gather their groups together, and go off on their own, and close the day with devotion and prayer.

Well, for our kids, those "church times" became a time to talk about what was going on in their lives, and to share what they were feeling in their hearts. And they were just pouring out their hearts to each other every night. It was such a privilege to be there with them and to experience that.

The kids shared some powerful stuff in those times, stuff that I will never repeat, because it was *so* personal. And they prayed for each other. The other groups would finish up and they would be going outside to play basketball, or just to hang out. But our kids would still be inside, lifting each other up in prayer.

On the day that we left, I had two people outside of our group who made a point to come and talk to me. One was a leader of one of the other church groups. She took me aside and said, "I just need to tell you, your kids have been so *awesome* this week. They work hard all day, they volunteer for all of the dirty jobs, and they are so *good* to each other. You can just tell that they really love each other."

And then, a few minutes later, the guy who was the Youth Works site director, the one in charge of the whole operation that week, came up to me and said, "I've been doing this for several summers now, and I've seen lots of church groups come through here. And I don't normally say this, but your group has been really amazing." He said, "I've seen them working with the people on the reservation. I've seen how they have a genuine love for Jesus, a genuine love for each other, and a genuine love for the Native American people. And, well, I just wanted to tell you that you have a very special group of young people."

When those two people said those things to me, my heart was just filled with amazing love for those kids. And I thought to myself, "This is how the Church is supposed to act all the time."

I know that we are all human. I know that we are all sinners. And I know that sometimes we are going to say things, and do things, that hurt one another. But I also know that, if we will draw closer to Jesus Christ in our own lives, if we will draw our lifeblood from him, then God is going to prune us and shape us and turn us into the kind of people who will make a difference in this world for Jesus Christ.

May God bless St. Mark Lutheran Church on this 60th anniversary. And may you always stay connected to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May you always stay firmly connected to *The True Vine*. Amen and Amen.