

## **“God of conversation and community” John 15:1-8**

**“I am the true vine, and 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.**

**Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.**

**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. 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.**

**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. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”**

If someone asked you to describe your God, how would you do it? How would you describe your God? One of ways to do it, actually I believe it is a very good way, for this was Luther’s understanding about our God as well, is to say that our God is God of conversation and community.

That’s right. God of conversation and community. As He speaks to us in His Word we can’t but notice that He is God who does everything by His word. By His word He created the heavens and the earth. But His word He still hold everything together.

By His word He addresses His creatures, created in His image and likeness. We know that in the beginning God was conversing with Adam and Eve, they enjoyed one another’s community in the garden of Eden.

We also know that at the end, our God will again be together with us, He will be among us, and you’ll be able to converse with Him face to face for you’ll see Him as He is. And even today, even if we are separated by our sin, our God of conversation and community comes to us to bless us in the Divine Service.

This is where He serves us. That is Him who speaks to you forgiving, teaching, making you wise and blessing you. Your God, God of conversation and community. He seeks out for you, He speaks to you, He wants to be with you.

Let’s see what today’s Gospel reading tells us about this God. Jesus said: **“I am the true vine, and 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.**

These verses are actually scary verses. Scary part of Jesus message. God as a vinedresser or as a gardener is a very popular image in the Bible. He is like a vinedresser and we are like His vineyard.

One thing is clear. We are not the same. He is the One who created us, and He is the one who knows why He did it, for what purpose. His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways, as Isaiah wrote.

In this image of a vineyard and a vinedresser, what he does makes so much sense. Most of you have had something to do with vineyards. Some of you quite a lot. Once you plant it, you expect it to bear a fruit. A good fruit.

What do you do, when there are branches which don't bear fruit, what do you do with them? It is so obvious. You cut them off, you take them away. You don't do it to harm these nice, but fruitless branches, but to protect and perfect your vineyard.

There is something scary in this metaphor. We may be tempted to think that all Christians are good branches that bear fruit and other people are fruitless branches. Actually, this time Jesus speaks only about Christians. About us.

He says that when we, Christians, don't bear fruit, we are taken away. Is this fair? Of course, if you don't serve the purpose for which you are created, why would you still be allowed to weaken the vineyard?

To realize this may make us worried. Are we doing enough? Are we good enough? These are wrong questions for us Christians. It really is not about what we do. That's why we need to read what Jesus says the next.

**“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. 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.”**

It would be difficult to find more fitting image to describe our dependence of and connection with Jesus Christ. As we receive our life, every breath from our Father in Heaven, our new life we receive from Jesus Christ, as we abide in Him. It's not about you being good, or doing good, it is about Jesus changing you and making us fruitful.

Whoever abides in Christ, bears much fruit, for apart from Christ we can do nothing. It is so obvious that a branch can't exist on its own. If it does not abide in the vine, there can't be any fruits. So the question for us is - how can we abide in Christ? The New Testament gives us clear answer. The Church is Christ's body, we all are members of His body.

To abide in Christ is to abide in His Church. Remember, your God is God of community. He comes to you to bless you, and He calls His Church His own body. To abide in Christ is to abide in His Church.

And I can already hear objections, I am sure you have heard them many times as well. Why would we need to belong to the Church? We can believe in God anywhere. Why should we attend the Divine Service? We can talk to God anywhere.

And they could continue their excuses by saying, why would a branch need to abide in the vine? For a branch can do very well on its own. It is so independent and autonomous. It does not need to abide in the vine, it can bear fruit wherever it is. But can it?

So, putting the best construction on this excuse and assuming that these people are actually looking for God's presence, the idea would be that they can choose to be with God wherever they decide, and obviously God is supposed to be there. Just so...

Of course, it is true that God is everywhere. For He is the Creator. But can you hear Him speaking everywhere? Can you hear what He wants you to know about Him? Can you hear Him speaking in Nepal, among thousands of dead, in the midst of terrible destruction? What is He saying to you? Can you understand it? Is He telling that everything is going to be OK?

To say that you can talk with God and be with God whenever you decide is to say that 'God has to listen to me, whenever I speak to Him', but on the other hand, 'I am not going to listen Him, nor come where He invites me'.

It is a very strange way to have a conversation. Our God is God of conversation, He desires to converse with His children. But every conversation needs two parties listening one to another.

By saying that one can do his own 'god-thing' whenever and however he decides, is to say that one can have a conversation where only he speaks. For he is not interested to hear what God has to say to him.

It is a very strange way to converse, indeed. These people should try to have this kind of conversation with someone else and see where it leads. How would any other person perceive this kind of disrespect and self-centeredness?

So you can see, how foolish and disrespectful this kind of excuse is, when it is used to reject God's own invitation. Our God, God of community and conversation says 'I want to come to be with you, to bless you, to converse with you, come and receive my blessings'.

How can someone dare to reply 'I can meet you and tell you what I want whenever and wherever I chose.' When people make this excuse, it is profitable to hear what Jesus said next: **"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."** Period.

These words of Jesus should serve as a reminder. Yes, sure, we don't want to sound harsh, we want to sound loving and welcoming, we want to avoid this part of the Biblical message that comes at the end. The Last Day, the Final Judgement.

For when people even hear the idea that someone may dare to evaluate, to judge our lives, if fact, to judge our hearts, our thoughts, our desires and possibly to pronounce that we have failed and are guilty, we get upset. O yes!

But we need to change this perspective of our 21<sup>st</sup> century super-inflated-individualism where everyone is entitle to do what is good in their own eyes, to Biblical understanding of this Last Day.

This picture of God as a vinedresser is so helpful. When a vinedresser prunes his vineyard and cuts off those branches which don't bear fruit, of even pulls out those vines which don't bear fruit, how do we understand it?

We don't say 'how do you dare to be so unloving! It is so unjust!' We see it as taking care of his vineyard, as protecting it, making it more fruitful, as getting rid of everything that corrupts, damages or waists its goodness. We see it as something very good.

The same way the Bible describes the Last Day. When our Divine Vinedresser will come to restore the goodness and perfection of His vineyard, when He will finally get rid of everything rotten and fruitless in His beautiful creation, then only fruitful branches will remain, bearing abundant fruits for the glory of our God.

It is not only necessary, but also fair that everyone receives what is due. Everyone who wants to be with our God of community and conversation, will be with Him, eternally. Those who don't want His presence, and don't want to listen to Him, will get what they desire, be separated from Him, eternally.

**“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”**

Our God is, indeed, God of community and conversation. He doesn't wait for you to find Him. He speaks to you first. He speaks you into existence. He searches for you, He calls you, He invites you, He makes you His beloved child. He wants to be with you. He shares His gifts with you in the Divine Service.

The Church is the body of Christ. But this body is created and sustained by God's Word. To be a member of Christ's body is not simply about belonging to a certain group of people, but to abide in God's word.

To take it in, reading, listening to God speaking in the Divine Service and in Bible Studies, in your home devotions, meditating about the Word, allowing the Word to shape everything you think and do, to create you anew - as Jesus' disciples.

Abiding in Christ's Word comes with this wonderful promise, that if you, indeed, abide in the Church and if Christ's Word shapes who you are, then whatever you wish will be done for you. This promise makes so much sense.

For if you are shaped and formed by the Word, then what your God wishes for you, will become more and more what you wish for yourself. By abiding in God's Word you and Christ are getting more and more 'on the same page'.

Then you can pray sincerely to our Father in heaven ‘your will be done’, for you trust and know that the Father’s will for you is the best that there can be.

**“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”**

This is what Jesus says to you. ‘If you are where I come to you, to enjoy the community of all saints, if you listen to my words, my Spirit will dwell with you and I will change your heart, and you will bear much fruit and my Father will be glorified.’

‘That’s not your job, that’s mine’, Jesus says. Don’t you worry. ‘I myself will make you fruitful. For my words and the Holy Spirit cannot and will not return without accomplishing their tasks.’

You see, we don’t need to focus on listing fruits that we may produce and to worry whether we are doing enough. The reality is that God’s Word changes your whole lives, He changes who you are and then - everything that you do, you may even not notice it.

The Spirit makes you grateful for the Father’s gifts, He urges you to come to the Father in prayer, He makes you to desire to serve our neighbours with all that you have and all that you are. He gives you “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Gal 5:22-23)

Once it happens, once you are together with and listening to God of community and conversation, your lives are changed, you are made into fruitful branches and you do glorify the Father of Jesus, the same One which invited you to call Him ‘Father’.  
Amen.