

## “Let Him cut you!” 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.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Amazing words of Jesus! This is one of the most comforting things that Jesus has said, and this is one of the most terrifying things that Jesus has said. It is both, indeed. You know how in our Lutheran tradition we speak about the Law and the Gospel. This is one of those wonderful insights that we have received through Dr Luther.

Have you noticed the questions in our Service orders, the ones every week written under the sermon title? Have you read them? Do you ask them after you have heard the sermon? They are there to help you to consider what God is speaking to you.

One of the questions is about God's expectations, the other is about God's attitude towards us, about everything He has done and does for us. We can say one is about the Law, and the other is about the Gospel; how you heard the Law and the Gospel.

When we speak about the Law and the Gospel, it is more than just reflecting on the content of the Scripture. It is also about the effect the Word of God has on us. It is about how the Holy Spirit applies the Word to us. What He does with the Word.

When the Holy Spirit brings you God's Law, He will create a godly fear in us, to keep us from deliberate sinning, to pull us out of our lukewarmness, to mobilize us to listen and to the Word and to strive to obey our Triune God in everything.

When the Holy Spirit brings you the Gospel, He brings you peace about God's unchanging attitude towards you – He has forgiven you, He is pleased with you. He brings you joyful assurance that the Triune God always invites you, calls you, welcomes you and embraces you, no matter how badly we have failed Him.

And it is not like the Law and the Gospel are two different attitudes of God, and you never know what mood He is in. When He speaks to us His Law, He always does it because of His gracious attitude towards us, because He cares for you.

So, the Law and the Gospel. Now let's reflect on our today's Gospel reading, and may the good Lord Jesus help us to hear how He speaks to us both His Law and His Gospel. Let's begin with the terrifying part first. It is terrifying.

**“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away.”** This is frightening. Jesus is speaking about Christians. Every branch that does not bear fruit the Father cuts off and throws away.

We know that the churches in the West are shrinking and vanishing. But what are the reasons? There are many that we can identify. Sexual revolution being one of them. Because of that Western society and also many churches have normalized and embraced anti-Biblical ideas and practices. Sex outside of marriage. What a big deal! Living together without marriage. Hmm... The institutions of marriage and family have been and continually are redefined to accommodate every desire of our twisted hearts. Children as early as in kindergarten are exposed to LGBTQ+ propaganda.

Abortion is now one of the means to protect ourselves from the consequences of our promiscuity, killing babies to the left and to the right. Almost every state in Australia now has full term abortion laws. Meaning, we can legally kill the babies up to the ninth month of pregnancy. Our sexual preferences have been elevated to the status of identity. And what have we said or done?

Another reason is the rejection of the Biblical Creation account and replacing it with the theory of evolution. Do you ever wonder what is taught in our Lutheran schools? If this false scientific theory is taught as true, then how can we trust anything that the Bible teaches on any subject? And what have we said or done?

Other reasons are the ways technology is changing society, our ever-growing business, our affluence that enables everyone to be autonomous and to do “whatever is good in their own eyes”. And what have we said or done?

These all are valid explanations. They all have contributed to where we are now. But what if there is something much more terrifying happening? What if the best way to understand the collapse of churches in the West is spiritual?

Namely, that the Father is cutting off those dry and useless branches that do not bear fruit? Those individuals, those congregations, those churches. Why keep those fruitless branches?! Why?! The judgment begins with the house of God.

If we are not terrified by what is happening, we should be. How fruitful are we? As individual Christians, as congregations, as the LCA? How fruitful are we?

Now we should ask the obvious question – what are those fruits that Jesus is talking about? For we have so many different departments in the LCA, all working around the clock. We have so many different organizations bearing the Lutheran name.

Schools and aged care facilities, Lutheran Care, the Australian Lutheran World Service, we have more mission directors than we have missionaries. Every congregation has many committees, we take care of so many properties.

There are so many different programs run in different places, annual events – Longest Lutheran Lunches, Walk My Ways, Sundays Fundays, and so on. Who can list all of them? Aren't we fruitful?

It's good we don't need to guess what fruits Jesus is referring to. As He Himself explains it to us. **“Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”**

The answer is simple and clear. If you abide in me, if you abide in my words. If we keep listening to God speaking to us in His word, and if in joyful obedience we allow the Word of God to shape our lives; what we believe and how we live. Those are the fruits.

That simple. But do we abide in the Word? Judge for yourself! We fire theologians who teach the Word of God, and hire those who teach what pleases our itching ears. Under the disguise of “being loving” we embrace anti-Christian ideologies and at the same time remain silent about what the Word of God clearly speaks to us.

And then, wow... What an unexpected surprise! We are shrinking! What if the Father has decided to cut us off as fruitless branches that are unwilling to bear fruit? What if that is Him who has taken many of our best theologians out of the LCA?

What if that is Him who has taken away a good two dozen of faithful Lutheran pastors from the LCA during the last 10 years alone? What if that is Him, who has given us such leaders, many of whom boldly lead us away from Scriptures? What if that is Him, who has blinded those who put together the Way Forward proposal, so that their falling away is clearly exposed to all who still have eyes to see and ears to hear?

How fruitful are we? Luckily next week we are having the SA/NT Pastors Conference, where we again are scheduled to play games. Literally! “Don’t you worry, trust us, pastors, we will lead you through! We know what we are doing!”

Now, please, hear this! **“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.”**

For our self-centred ears, at first, this may not sound like beautiful music. But just reflect on what Jesus is saying. He is so close to you. He is so intimately connected with you. He has welcomed and embraced you in the very fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the true vine. You are His branches. It is from Him, from being intimately connected with Him that you receive His Spirit, His life, true life, everlasting life. The very source of life, the Son of God, who has true life in Him, has grafted you into Himself. It is His life that pulsates in you as you remain in His words.

And what an incredible picture of the Word of God Jesus gives. It is not just about the marks on the paper, or the vibrations of the air. When you abide in God’s Word, the Eternal Word, the Son of God Himself abides in you.

Yes, this is the way He has chosen to come to you. As we listen to Him, read His message, discuss it with our fellow saints, as we feed on His Word in His Holy Meal, the Spirit indwells in you and makes home with you. The whole Trinity welcomes you with open arms and hugs you.

This is how Jesus speaks about bearing fruits. When we cherish His Word, when we gladly look for opportunities to hear it, learn to understand it, discuss and delight in it, when we reflect on it, when we pray for the Holy Spirit to enlighten us, to renew us, to reshape us to be more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of God never returns without accomplishing His purpose. We may not even notice; we usually don’t even notice how He changes us. How He fills us with love towards others, with joy that flows over, with peace that surpasses our understanding, with patience in face of this life’s challenges, with kindness, goodness, faithfulness.

This is what Jesus is saying. If you abide in His Word, it is Him who bears fruits through you. He will renew and transform you, He will reshape your lives, He will bear abundant fruits through your lives, you may not even notice it. Only abide in Him!

And as we do, He changes our hearts, He aligns our desires with His good and gracious will for us. Listen to this: **“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”** How wonderful!

However, this doesn't mean that there is some magical trick, if we abide in Jesus, then we can make God do whatever we want. No! It means that if we abide in Jesus, He transforms our hearts and wills to be in harmony with the will of the Father. It means what we will be desiring the same that our Father knows to be good for us. Whatever we wish will be what our God wishes for us and it will be done.

But there is something else. **“Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”**

See, the Father not only cuts off the fruitless branches, but He also prunes the fruitful ones. Why? So that they would bear much fruit. And cutting hurts! Remember the Law? It accuses us, it reveals our sinfulness, it makes us feel uncomfortable, perhaps, guilty, uneasy. This is how God the Father prunes us; this is how He cuts off those bits in us that hinder our fruitfulness.

When we hear something that makes us feel that way, how does our old nature want to react? Yes, it wants to justify and defend itself, and often it does it by turning against those who bring that uncomfortable message.

Those are our pastors. What happens is this – we start looking for faults in our pastors; but he hasn't done this, and that could be done better, and this is too long, and that is too little. There are always more things that we, pastors, haven't done than we have. We are such easy targets, and usually quite patient, so it is quite safe to attack us.

But think about this, to turn against your pastors is like getting angry at the blade that the Father uses to make you more fruitful. See it for what it is, and don't try to shoot the messengers! That's foolish. They are sent to care for you and to bless you.

Instead, when the Law cuts, rejoice! Let's rejoice when the Father prunes us, let's rejoice when He helps us to see where we are failing, where we are in error, where we have gone astray, where we are in spiritual danger, where we are indifferent, where we could bear so much more fruit. We all need His help.

And He does this to make you more fruitful. Therefore, rejoice, be grateful and rejoice! Rejoice in the Law! For if the Spirit cuts to the heart, that means the Father cares for you! Rejoice in the Gospel for God's attitude towards you is not going to change; He is ever faithful, ever committed, ever forgiving, ever caring. Always here for you.

Blessed are we, that every week we can gather to the Divine Service, that every week we can hear the Word of God, the Law and the Gospel. Blessed are we for having the opportunities to study the Word of God every week, and if needed we could have even more. Ask and it will be given to you!

Blessed are we for we still have this incredible gift and privilege that we can abide in Jesus and that His Word abides in us, making us alive, truly alive and bearing God-pleasing fruits through us, so that our Father is glorified and we prove to be truly His disciples. May He be patient with us, ungrateful branches, and make us more fruitful! Amen.