**First German Lutheran Church**

**April 28, 2024**

**Sermon Theme: Dear Branches Remember…**

**Jesus is Your Life, God is Not Done With You Yet**

**First Lesson: 1 John 3:18-24**

**Gospel Lesson and Sermon Text: John 15:1-8**

**Preacher: Pastor Jacob Hoff**

Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

“No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” For he knew who was going to betray him.

It’s Holy Thursday, the night before Jesus’ death on the cross. Having washed their feet, that notable meal unfolded with its notable moments: Judas left to do his dirty work; Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. The meal was over. They were preparing to leave that upper room for the Garden of Gethsemane, and it is there, in that setting, where Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches.”

“If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”… to put those words in that context; to think about what the disciples were about to witness – Jesus’ traumatic arrest, torture and execution on the cross… the glorious resurrection three days later, how long did it take for the vine/branches metaphor to really sink in, do you think? How long before they understood what in the world Jesus was talking about?

Hindsight is always clearer. I look back at this metaphor in that setting, and I’ll tell you what I see. I see branches attached to the vine that were about to endure a pretty intense pruning.

Those 11 disciples were already attached to the vine: “You are already clean,” Jesus said to them. He said it when he washed Peter’s feet and he said it again after the meal. “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” They were already attached to Jesus. They were already looking to Jesus and his word as their source of life and salvation. They were branches already bearing some fruit. But they were about to get pruned.

You know how pruning works, right? The gardener, in the hopes of producing a better harvest, cuts the plant. He hurts the plant, as it were, because he knows better than the plant where and how it should be growing. He wounds the plant and makes it struggle because he knows that will make the plant stronger and more productive.

And so, we can look back at those 11 disciples and we can see how the painful pruning they were about to undergo would ultimately make all 11 of them stronger and more productive branches. The arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, the fear and shame as they fled and hid, the terror as they locked themselves away over that weekend, and then Easter happened. What happened on that most holy of weeks changed those 11 disciples forever. With hindsight we can see it, the Gardener used some pretty intense pruning to make some pretty productive branches.

Luther has a memorable sermon on John 15 where he puts us in the shoes of those branches in Jesus’ metaphor. Imagine you are a branch, happily growing on a vine on a sunny slope somewhere warm. One day you see a gardener walking toward you with a knife, a shovel, and a bucket of manure. “What good could possibly come from this,” the branch might be tempted to wonder. Well it turns out that the gardener can use a knife, a shovel, and a bucket of manure for a lot of good.

What is true for the branch, was true for those 11 disciples. We can see it with hindsight. On that Holy Thursday, those disciples were already branches attached to the vine, but God was going to prune them to make them stronger and more productive. They already had life through Jesus, but God wasn’t done with them yet.

This is how God works. The Vine gives life and the Gardener prunes. Jesus gives everything needed to live, for now and into eternity. The Father stays busy pruning, so that the branches grow stronger and more productive. Hindsight brings clarity. That is what he did with those 11 disciples. I wonder, can we use hindsight with those 11 disciples to bring a little clarity to our present?

Can I tell you what we, as a congregation, get to see today/Sunday? We are about to see some branches already attached to the vine that the Gardener isn’t done with yet.

We have four confirmands who are already attached to the vine. They have been learning from Jesus and his word to look to Jesus as the source of life and salvation. They are branches that are already bearing some fruit. They went through an examination – the hard, nerve-racking experience of publicly sharing what they’ve learned about Jesus. They are going to stand up and make promises – that as branches attached to the vine, they intend to stay that way.

They are already attached. They are already producing fruit. Jesus made them that way. They were born dead branches good for nothing but the fire. But Jesus brought them in and gave them life. Jesus made them that way, and, having given them life, he’s not done with them yet.

You see, the Gardener wants all of his branches to grow stronger and more fruitful. And that is certainly true for our young confirmands. Confirmation is not graduation. When they graduate in a month, they will be done with grade school. But confirmation is not like that. Confirmation, the very word, comes from the Latin word for strengthening. Confirmation is a day when we recognize that these four branches have gotten stronger, they have grown in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But they are not graduating, the Gardener isn’t done with them yet.

Just like the Gardener did with those original 11 disciples, he is going to let each of these young people learn that Jesus isn’t just some grade school test they had to pass to be confirmed, he is the Vine. He is their life. He is their Savior. The pruning won’t always be fun. They are going to have their share of Good Fridays (days when nothing seems to be going their way). They are going to have their share of Easters (days when God plasters a smile across their faces). Through it all, the words of Jesus need to ring true. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Dear confirmands, remember.

Jesus is your life.

God is not done with you yet.

You know, I will be ok with it, if in 10 years you don’t remember what “vicarious atonement” means. It won’t bother me all that much if in 10 years you don’t remember all of the “what does this means?” to the Ten Commandments and Apostle’s Creed. But it is my prayer that God will never let you forget that Jesus is your life. I want your connection to Jesus to grow stronger. And you know the way that connection grows stronger, right? “You are already clean ***because of the word I have spoken to you*,”**Jesus said. “If you remain in me ***and my words remain in you***,” Jesus said. This better not be the last time I see you in church. You better not treat confirmation as if it were graduation.

Jesus is your life.

God is not done with you yet.

Your job, as a branch, is to remember who gives you life.

This is how God works. The Vine gives life and the Gardener prunes. Jesus gives everything needed to live, for now and into eternity. The Father stays busy pruning, so that the branches grow stronger and more productive. It is how God worked with those 11 disciples and it is how God is going to work with our 4 confirmands.

Then, of course, it’s not just our four confirmands that can learn from this vine/branches metaphor.

Jesus is your life.

God’s not done with you yet.

Can you see what this metaphor means?

God grafted you into the vine. You were a dead branch, destined for the fire, and he connected you to Jesus and gave you life. And he’s not done with you yet. He wants your connection to Jesus to be stronger and more fruitful. As a branch, your only job is to remember where your life comes from. Jesus will give you life. The Father will see to the pruning. Look to Jesus. Expect the pruning.

Jesus is the vine. You are the branches.

Jesus is your life.

God is not done with you yet.

Stay connected to Jesus. Amen.