



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**5th Sunday of Easter: May 2, 2021**

**Sermon Title: "The Vine"**

**Gospel Text: John 15:1-8**

Grace and peace to you, friends. Way back in seminary I could not have imagined a Sunday, like today, where I would be delivering this sermon in so many different settings. Some will hear these words by means of a YouTube video. Others will hear them on a car radio in Grace's parking lot. Still others will hear them outdoors, in our courtyard. Today, for the first time in a very long time, some of you will hear these words in Grace's sanctuary. And of course there are quite a few who will be listening on WRSC on a radio, or streaming audio on a computer.

And so before we go any further today, let's pause for a moment and give thanks for the remarkable technology and the equally remarkable teams of people who have made this possible. We dare not take any of that for granted, because if there's one thing I think we've all learned during this pandemic, it's that we realize now, more than ever before, how important it is for us to remain connected.

With all this in mind, today's Gospel lesson is very timely. Jesus said, "I am the true vine." Jesus was using a symbol of connection that was powerfully effective for his original audience, because most of *them* had some familiarity with agricultural imagery. Few of *us* nowadays are as intimately engaged with farming, and truth be told, most of us are probably far more familiar with *wine* than we are with *grapevines*. But nevertheless, there's still something about *Jesus as our vine* that all of us can grasp.

At its most fundamental level, a vine is simply a source of life. That sounds like Jesus, right? It becomes even clearer when we examine the anatomy of a grapevine more closely. It all starts under the ground, with the *rootstock*. That's the woody part, deep below the soil, that anchors the grape vine and draws nourishment from the earth. That nourishment is transported up the *trunk* and outward through what are called *cordons*. Think of them as the "arms" of the grapevine. The cordons hold *shoots* – they are sort of like the "fingers" of the vine – which produce *leaves* for gathering sunshine and producing food for the plant, *tendrils*, which enable the vine to attain greater security and stability by grabbing onto things, and finally *fruit*, which is the grapevine's ultimate reason for being.

It's a complex and diverse structure. But the plant's very existence depends upon that vine, which carries life-giving nutrients from the *roots* to the *fruits*. As long as that connection is intact, the plant survives and thrives. But if it is severed, then everything is at risk of dying. This image reminds me a lot of a congregation like Grace Lutheran. We too are a complex and diverse structure made up of a vast array of parts. Today alone, think of how many different

people and how many different sets of gifts and talents had to come together just to make worship possible. Pastors, ushers, musicians, sound technicians – the list goes on and on. Eliminate just one of those groups, and we are diminished.

Of course, people *do* come and go, especially in a congregation as large as ours. Some of those losses may *slow us down* for a while, but eventually God sends others here and the vine keeps growing. But what happens when *Jesus* is removed? What happens when *he* is not here to connect us? The entire vine, from the deepest of roots to the very tips of the tendrils, dies. In today's Gospel, Jesus forcefully reminds us of this reality when he says, "apart from me, you can do nothing." He's right.

I believe that one of everyone's biggest fears throughout this pandemic was the fear that in our isolation we would become permanently disconnected. Grandparents ached to see and hug their grandchildren. Family members spread throughout the country lamented that they couldn't come together for significant occasions like weddings and funerals. Friends who looked forward to weekly routines like a Tuesday morning coffee club worried that with the loss of treasured traditions and routines, the embers of friendship would grow cold. Intuitively, we all know how critically important it is to be connected.

The same has been true here at Grace. We all wondered what might happen to our congregation if we couldn't come together to worship, to eat, to celebrate, and to mourn. Yet somehow, *our vine* – *Jesus Christ* – has managed to keep us spiritually nourished and connected. By his grace we've found a vast array of ways to worship. Jesus has continued to draw new members to our Grace family too. Giving to the budget has increased. We even paid off about a million dollars in debt. I marvel at what Jesus our vine has enabled us to do. Everything good and positive that has been accomplished in, with, and through this congregation in such challenging times is because of Jesus. To him we rightly give all of the glory.

But as we start to see more light at the end of this COVID tunnel and imagine our lives without masks and social distancing, and as we envision a Grace Lutheran that slowly but steadily works its way back to more and more in-person worship and activity, how does today's Gospel lesson speak to *that*? After all, if Jesus our vine kept us nourished and connected through the unprecedented challenges of a global pandemic, what is there to worry about, once things get back to normal?

Well, in many ways, getting back to normal – however you define that – might be the biggest challenge of all. Perhaps a *virus* couldn't disconnect us, but what happens when we have lots of other options besides coming to church? Will we be tempted to *voluntarily* sever our connection to the life-giving vine of Christ and his Church by choosing other things that seem more exciting or engaging? Will it be easier and more convenient to stay home than to come together, shoulder-to-shoulder, and do the hard work of forming and strengthening person-to-person relationships?

Of course as God tends our vine there's grace – there's *always* grace – but there are things we can and should do to help tend our little portion of that vine and strengthen our connection to Christ and to one another... simple things like praying, reading and studying God's

Word, regularly worshiping, and offering up our time, treasure, and talents for the glory of God and the service of our neighbor. Those fundamental discipleship practices greatly help us abide in the vine and bear holy fruit.

We're all going to have a lot of choices as we emerge from the pandemic. And so let me lift up one more agricultural notion from today's Gospel: *pruning*. If you garden at all, you know how important it is to prune shrubs and trees and even vines. By cutting something back, you're not damaging the plant but, instead, redirecting its energy so it can grow, thrive, and bear *more* fruit. The same is true in our lives. What should we consider pruning or perhaps even eliminating so that we can experience growth in our faith and in our relationship in Christ, and bear more and better fruit for God and neighbor? It's a question I hope we will all be considering in the months to come.

For now though, I'll simply close by expressing my gratitude to *Jesus* and to *you* for the connection we share here at Grace. What a privilege it is to be one of your pastors and see every day the holy, sacred fruit our Lord is producing in this little corner of the vineyard. Maintaining our connection in Christ will be of critical importance as we move forward, because apart from him, *we can do nothing*. But nourished by his connection and his grace, we will bear the fruits of love, and there will be nothing we cannot accomplish. Thanks be to God. Amen.