

John 15:1-8
April 28, 2024

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our vine who roots us to God. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is quite timely, isn't it? Aside from the snow we have right now. How many of you have been out trimming your hedges, pruning your fruit trees, or cleaning up your shrubs?

Well... if you haven't started yet, you may want to get on it. Now is the time to get it done, because new growth is starting to grow.

It is better to do trimming before the new growth starts, but it's not too late to get all the old, dead, and sucker branches off your trees and shrubs before too much energy gets wasted on limbs that are not going to be productive. Those worthless branches that just get in the way and rob the tree of precious resources.

And why waste your plants' energy on things that are zapping it for no reason? If you prune off all the things that are wasting energy, stealing nutrients, and blocking the sun, the tree will grow more efficiently and grow more of what is truly important, fruit. Fruit that is not for itself, but for others to enjoy so that its seeds can be scattered.

Fact - fruit trees actually need other animals to eat its fruit so that more trees can be planted and more fruit grown. When birds steal cherries off of a cherry tree, they drop the seeds after they get done eating the fruit and thereby more cherry trees get planted.

Think about that as we have Holy Communion today.

If you want to have beautiful peaches, you trim off everything that has no chance of producing fruit, so that the branches that can produce fruit yield the juiciest fruit you can find. That goes for grapes, apples, and roses too. When the limbs that are wasting energy and nutrients get lopped off, it makes the tree or shrub so much more productive, because it is much more healthy.

Jesus understood all of this quite well, so he often compares us, his followers, to fruit trees or grape vines, reminding us to produce good fruit. Good fruit that is produced because we are connected to him and thereby rooted in God.

And that good fruit of Christians is unconditional love. God is love, Jesus is God's love personified, and we are God's love embodied and in action today.

So, when we love our neighbors and care for them, as God does for us, it is God producing good fruit in us and through us. The good fruit of unconditional love is pumped into us by God who loves everyone and then poured out of us to our neighbor.

And by sharing God's love through the fruit God is producing in us, we help others produce good fruit by connecting them to the vine. By planting the seeds of God's love in them, they will know God's unconditional love first hand, which will help lead them to identifying the dead branches and the suckers that are wasting their own energy.

Good Christian fruit that nourishes others includes helping people let go of something they have no control over, sharing words of affirmation, removing guilt by forgiving them or asking them for forgiveness if we have wronged them, and by meeting people where they are, removing all forms of shame from them by supporting them and not shunning them.

Good fruit also includes simply holding a person's hand and saying nothing, just letting them know they are not alone. It includes smiling at a stranger to let them know they are welcome, and it also includes helping someone with their difficult task, demonstrating God's mercy and willingness to help.

And the best way for us to produce good fruit is to know our own dead branches and the things that have zapped energy from us. Knowing that will produce fruit in two ways. One, it is the - yes I have this difficulty and I am asking God for help. Or two, it is - I had that same problem and through God's help that branch is gone from my life because this or that happened.

When we share our own struggles, good fruit is produced because confession actually connects us, one to the other. And, when we support one another, the fruit produced is the fruit of hope.

Hope is produced when we tell others, or when they remind us, that we are not alone. God is here to help us. God is merciful. So, when we say - "I know that God will help me with this and God will help you too, or I know God has helped me with that and God will do the same for you." Not in some far-off time or place, but here and now through Christians, little Christs, people like you who are connected to God and producing good fruit - Hope is known in the world.

Just as salve is soothing so good fruit is nourishing.

We are not in this alone. God is working with us and through us, so let's help each other remove the branches that are blocking the sun. It will improve our health.

And the way to do that is first to know ourselves. We cannot help others until we know ourselves. So, here is an important exercise for you. Imagine yourself as a fruit tree, what branches are wasting your energy, time, or nutrients? Are there any branches that are dead? Is there a wound that is causing a disease to enter the entire tree, slowly killing you, not only preventing you from producing fruit, but from merely staying alive?

The first step is identifying those branches so that they can be removed. Ask God to free you from their subjugation. You don't need them. God doesn't need them. Confess them and know God's mercy. Know God's love for you in the gifts offered here - Baptism, our grafting into Christ, and Holy Communion, which feeds the Holy Spirit, our direct connection to God.

God only wants you to be healthy. When you are healthy, you can produce good fruit, which itself is a healthy activity. Healthy trees produce good fruit!

Humans waste a lot of energy on things that hold us back, that prevent us from boldly living God's life in the world, the life that is resurrected from the things of death, which is primarily fear.

Fear kills. Fear of the unknown. Fear of being rejected. Fear of getting hurt. Fear of looking foolish. Fear of not fitting in. Fear of fear itself. Fear. It only motivates us to death, never to life. It cuts us off from the vine and the roots that feed us. So, we need to chop it off.

And the amazing thing is that the deadly things, once they are chopped off, are actually helpful. They make for good mulch, which actually leads to life. We recognize that through Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus was killed out of fear and was resurrected out of love, and his death into resurrection gives us life. We have life, because the fear of death is destroyed and we know God's love is eternal.

So, when dead branches get removed, and sucker branches get cut off, and damaged branches are pruned, they are not forgotten, they don't just disappear. They are transformed and their death gives us life. Without them, we are much more healthy and in their death, they improve our lives.

As mulch placed at the base of a tree feeds the tree and keeps bugs and weeds away, so the mulch of our pruned branches nourishes us by returning nutrients back to us and by keeping unhealthy behaviors at bay.

And even if the branches get burned, they still help us. Ash itself is not without merit. Ash added to the soil boosts pH, adds nutrients, and deter slugs and snails. The remnant of burnt branches makes us healthier.

So, we need not be afraid of having useless branches cut off from us, no matter how much we feel we need to hold onto them, because if we don't remove them, they can eventually make us useless, preventing us from producing any good fruit at all.

And so, built into Holy Communion is the forgiveness of sins, God's love and mercy, in the cup of wine. God gives us his good fruit in the chalice, so that good fruit can be produced in us and the seeds of his love can be scattered in the world.

Communion is the weekly opportunity for God to remove the dead, sucker, and unproductive branches from our lives, so that we can be healthier and live more boldly.

In worship, we are freed from all fear, so that we can join God's life in the world, producing God's fruit for the world – love that is unconditional and unlimited.

Love is life and we have that love life through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, the vine who roots us to God who is life.

Through his resurrection, Christ eternally connects us to God's live giving love that can never be killed. Through the Holy Spirit, God produces the good fruit of resurrection in us, so that everywhere we go, nourishing fruit can be produced and seeds can be planted.

Christ is the vine and we are the branches. Connected to him, orchards can take over briar patches.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

And through him we also are risen to new life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.