

"REMAIN IN ME"
JOHN 15:1-8
FIFTH S. OF EASTER
MESSIAH, BOERNE
APRIL 28, 2024

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY
SPIRIT. AMEN.

TEXT: JOHN 15:1-8

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:

TO MOST OF YOU, JESUS' WORDS IN OUR TEXT TODAY PROBABLY
SOUND FAMILIAR. WELL, TODAY I WOULD LIKE YOU NOT ONLY TO *HEAR*
THEM BUT ALSO TO *SEE* THEM. IN MY HAND I HOLD A FRESHLY CUT
VINE, COVERED WITH BEAUTIFUL, SHINY GREEN LEAVES. UNTIL A
SHORT TIME AGO, IT HAD BEEN GROWING PURPOSEFULLY IN MY HOUSE
AND WAS VIBRANTLY ALIVE. NOW, HERE IS ANOTHER VINE I CUT ON
TUESDAY. IT IS SOMEWHAT WITHERED, PURPOSELESS, AND PRETTY
MUCH WORTHLESS OTHER THAN TO BE THROWN AWAY AND BURNED UP.
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO VINES IS CLEAR AND SIMPLE. ONE
VINE, AT LEAST UNTIL A SHORT TIME AGO, HAD THE NOURISHMENT OF
THE PLANT STILL FLOWING THROUGH IT. THE OTHER VINE LOST ITS
ATTACHMENT TO THE PLANT'S NOURISHMENT AND DIED.

HOW'S YOUR LIFE? WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE YOURSELF AS
PURPOSEFULLY GROWING AND VIBRANTLY ALIVE? OR DO YOU TOO OFTEN
FEEL WITHERED, LIFELESS, PURPOSELESS, AND PRETTY MUCH
WORTHLESS? TODAY WE WILL NOT ONLY HEAR BUT ALSO "SEE" HOW
PROFOUND JESUS' WORDS ARE WHEN HE TELLS US, "REMAIN IN ME."

FIRST OF ALL, LET'S CONSIDER THE *BLESSINGS* OF REMAINING IN THE VINE. JESUS SPOKE THE WORDS OF OUR TEXT ON MAUNDY THURSDAY EVENING DURING THE LAST SUPPER. IT WAS SPRINGTIME, SO THE IMAGE OF A CENTRAL VINE GIVING BIRTH TO A NEW YEAR'S GREEN GROWTH OF BRANCHES WOULD HAVE BEEN FRESH IN THE DISCIPLES' MINDS. FOR THREE YEARS JESUS HAD BEEN THE VINE THAT SUSTAINED THE DISCIPLES DURING TIMES OF JOY AND SADDNESS, LEARNING AND WONDER, HESITANCY AND GROWTH. BUT LATER THAT SAME EVENING, JESUS WOULD BE TAKEN AWAY FROM THEM, AND THE FOLLOWING MORNING HE WOULD BE CRUCIFIED FOR THE SINS OF THE WHOLE WORLD. PETER DEMONSTRATED JUST HOW TIMELY JESUS' WORDS WERE, HAVING PROMISED NEVER TO LEAVE HIM BUT DENYING HIM WHEN SEPARATED FROM HIM. YOU SEE, BRANCHES CAN LIVE ONLY WHEN THEY RECEIVE LIFE FROM THE VINE, SO IT WAS THE RIGHT TIME FOR JESUS TO TALK TO HIS DISCIPLES ABOUT REMAINING IN HIM, EVEN AS HE WAS ABOUT TO BE TAKEN FROM THEM.

TODAY WE ARE IN GOD'S HOUSE PROCLAIMING THAT WE ARE CONNECTED TO JESUS. WE WERE BORN IN A SINFUL WORLD DEAD IN OUR TRESPASSES AND SINS, BUT BY GOD'S GRACE WE WERE GRAFTED INTO THE LIFE-GIVING VINE OF JESUS THROUGH FAITH IN GOD'S WORD AND IN THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM. EVEN SINCE THAT MIRACULOUS GRAFTING BY WORD, WATER, AND THE SPIRIT, WE HAVE HAD THE VERY LIFE OF CHRIST FLOWING THROUGH US, KEEPING US ALIVE BY FAITH. THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS JEALOUSLY GUARDED THAT

GRAFT OF GRACE AND FAITH BY GOD'S WORD AND THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR, IN WHICH WE RECEIVE CHRIST'S TRUE BODY AND TRUE BLOOD FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS, LIFE, AND SALVATION. AS LONG AS WE REMAIN GRAFTED BY GRACE INTO JESUS AS OUR SOURCE OF LIFE, WE WILL NEVER HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT HAVING LIFE. BUT JESUS WANTS MORE FOR US THAN JUST TO HAVE LIFE. HE ALSO WANTS US TO BE ABLE TO LIVE THAT LIFE JOYFULLY, SO THROUGH WORD AND SACRAMENT HE ALSO GRACIOUSLY GIVES US ALL THAT WE NEED TO LIVE THAT BLESSED LIFE AS HIS HOLY CHILDREN.

TODAY I WOULD LIKE TO FOCUS ON THREE OF THOSE NOURISHING GIFTS OF GRACE THAT JESUS WANTS US TO HAVE: *STRENGTH, WISDOM,* AND *ABILITY*. EACH OF THESE GIFTS GIVES US THE POWER AND ENDURANCE NEEDED TO LIVE IN THE FACE OF SIN AND TRIAL. FIRST OF ALL, AS WE STAY GRAFTED INTO JESUS, WE RECEIVE *STRENGTH* BEYOND OUR OWN-STRENGTH TO RESIST THE TEMPTATIONS OF SATAN, STRENGTH TO OFFER KINDNESS AND LOVE IN A LOVELESS WORLD, STRENGTH TO LIVE WITH JOY AND PEACE EVEN AS OUR WORLD SEEMINGLY FALLS APART. ST. PAUL WRITES: "I CAN DO EVERYTHING THROUGH [CHRIST] WHO GIVES ME STRENGTH" (PHIL 4:13). STURDY LEAVES OF KINDNESS, GENTLENESS, AND LOVE ARE BOUND TO GET NOTICED BY THOSE WHOSE LIVES ARE DRIED AND WITHERED BY A SINFUL WORLD. IN ORDER TO MAKE SURE WE ALWAYS USE JESUS' STRENGTH TO BRING HOPE, WE MUST HEED JESUS' WORDS: "REMAIN IN ME."

SECOND, AS WE REMAIN GRAFTED INTO JESUS, HE NOURISHES OUR LIVES WITH THE *WISDOM* TO USE HIS STRENGTH IN GOD-PLEASING WAYS. YOU SEE, HAVING STRENGTH IS ONE THING, BUT KNOWING HOW TO USE IT IS SOMETHING ELSE. IT CALLS FOR WISDOM, AND AS THE BOOK OF PROVERBS REMINDS US: "THE LORD GIVES WISDOM, AND FROM HIS MOUTH COME KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING" (2:6). WHILE THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD CALLS ON US TO FALL BACK ON OUR OWN STRENGTH TO ACHIEVE SELFISH ENDS, JESUS' WISDOM CALLS US TO FALL INTO HIS HANDS OF MERCY AND LOVE. GOD'S WISDOM NOURISHES OUR LIVES TO BRING FORTH FLOWERS OF WISE CHOICES IN LIVING. AS THE FLOWER OF WISE CHOICES BLOOMS ON GOD'S PEOPLE NOURISHED BY HIS WISDOM, NEIGHBORS, CO-WORKERS, FRIENDS, AND FAMILY WILL BE ATTRACTED BY THE BEAUTY AND AROMA OF A LIFE WELL-LIVED. THOSE WHO PRACTICE SELF-CONTROL BY LIVING THE WISDOM OF GOD'S TRUTH WILL ATTRACT ATTENTION AS FLOWERS ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF NECTAR-SEEKING BEES AND ADMIRING HUMANS.

THIRD, JESUS DESIRES TO GIVE US HIS WISDOM AND STRENGTH TO BE USED WITH OUR GOD-GIVEN *ABILITIES*. EACH OF US HAS BEEN GIFTED BY GOD WITH A UNIQUE SET OF ABILITIES TO SERVE HIM. THINK OF THESE ABILITIES AS THE FRUIT THAT OUR BRANCHES PRODUCE FOR SHARING THE STRENGTH AND THE WISDOM OF GOD WITH PEOPLE IN THE WORLD. AS THE LIFE OF JESUS FLOWS THROUGH US, WE ARE EMPOWERED TO USE OUR ABILITIES TO SPREAD HIS LIFE IN A DYING WORLD. AS WE REMAIN IN JESUS, HIS LIFE WILL FLOW

THROUGH US, AND WE WILL BEAR FRUIT TO HIS GLORY AND FOR THE FURTHERANCE OF HIS KINGDOM OF GRACE ON EARTH.

NOW, *THAT'S* GOOD NEWS! THE BAD NEWS IS THAT SATAN IS GOING TO TRY AND SEPARATE US FROM OUR GRAFTED UNION WITH JESUS, AND HE IS A MASTER AT IT. THE DEVIL KNOWS THAT HE CAN'T SEVER US BY FORCE FROM THE LIFE OF JESUS. REMEMBER: THE HOLY SPIRIT GUARDS OUR LIVES THROUGH THE GRACE GOD GRANTS US IN WORD AND SACRAMENT. NO, SATAN TRIES TO CONVINCING US THAT WE WOULD BE BETTER OFF IF WE WERE SEPARATED FROM JESUS. THE DEVIL, THE WORLD, AND OUR SINFUL NATURE SEEK TO ENTICE US TO LEAVE THE SOURCE OF OUR LIFE AND STRENGTH BY OUR OWN CHOICE. AS RIDICULOUS AS THAT MAY SOUND, IT SADLY WORKS ALL TOO OFTEN.

FROM EARLY IN LIFE OUR SINFUL NATURE TEMPTS US TO TRY AND GO IT ALONE. "I CAN DO IT MYSELF," IS A COMMON REFRAIN SPOKEN BY LITTLE CHILDREN. NOW, WHILE LEARNING TO TIE ONE'S OWN SHOESTRINGS IS AN ACCEPTABLE PART OF GROWING UP, TRYING TO REMAIN SPIRITUALLY ALIVE BY ONE'S OWN STRENGTH, WISDOM, AND ABILITY IS *NOT*. IN FACT, IT'S *IMPOSSIBLE!* REMAINING GRAFTED AND ALIVE IN JESUS BY GRACE IS THE ONLY WAY TO STAY ALIVE FOREVER. HIS FREE GIFT OF LIFE GIVEN THROUGH WORD AND SACRAMENT IS THE ONLY THING THAT KEEPS US ALIVE.

THAT REMINDS ME OF THE STORY ABOUT A LITTLE GIRL AND HER STRING OF FAKE PEARLS. ONE DAY THE LITTLE GIRL SAW A FAKE PEARL NECKLACE AT THE CHECKOUT COUNTER OF A LOCAL SUPERMARKET

AND ASKED HER MOTHER IF SHE COULD HAVE IT. SINCE THE LITTLE GIRL RARELY ASKED FOR ANYTHING, THE MOTHER BOUGHT HER THE NECKLACE. WELL, THAT LITTLE GIRL WORE THOSE FAKE PEARLS EVERY DAY, AND EVERY NIGHT SHE WOULD CAREFULLY CLEAN THEM AND LAY THEM ON HER NIGHTSTAND, READY TO BE WORN THE NEXT DAY.

SEEING HOW ATTACHED TO THOSE FAKE PEARLS HIS DAUGHTER WAS AND HOW RESPONSIBLE SHE WAS IN CARING FOR THEM, HER FATHER DECIDED TO BUY HER A NECKLACE OF REAL PEARLS. THAT EVENING, AFTER SAYING PRAYERS, THE FATHER SAID, "HONEY, I HAVE A SURPRISE FOR YOU, BUT FIRST YOU MUST GIVE ME YOUR NECKLACE." THE LITTLE GIRL QUICKLY GRABBED THE NECKLACE AND HID IT UNDER HER COVERS AND SAID, "OH, NO, DADDY. YOU CAN HAVE MY WHITE HORSE, OR EVEN MY DOLLY, BUT YOU CAN'T HAVE MY NECKLACE." DISAPPOINTED, BUT PATIENT, THE FATHER KISSED HIS DAUGHTER GOODNIGHT AND LEFT HER ROOM.

THIS RITUAL OF ASKING AND REFUSING WENT ON AND ON, NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, FOR NEARLY TWO WEEKS. FINALLY, ONE EVENING AS THE DAUGHTER WAS FINISHING HER PRAYERS, TEARS STARTED WELLING UP IN HER EYES. SHE SAID, "DADDY, PLEASE DON'T ASK ME FOR MY PEARLS. I WANT TO KEEP THEM FOREVER!" HER FATHER REPLIED, "BUT I MUST ASK. WILL YOU PLEASE GIVE ME YOUR NECKLACE?" SLOWLY, RELUCTANTLY, SHE BROUGHT HER HAND OUT FROM UNDER THE COVERS AND UNCLENCHED HER FIST, DROPPING THE NECKLACE INTO HER FATHER'S HAND. THE FATHER SMILED AND REACHED INTO HIS POCKET

AND PLACED THE REAL PEARL NECKLACE INTO HIS DAUGHTER'S HAND. REALIZING THE REAL TREASURE THAT HAD BEEN GIVEN TO HER, SHE SAID, "OH, DADDY! I THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO TAKE MY PEARLS AWAY FROM ME, BUT ALL ALONG YOU JUST WANTED TO GIVE ME REAL PEARLS!"

HOW OFTEN HAVEN'T WE HELD TIGHTLY, TENACIOUSLY TO THE CHEAP, FAKE TREASURES OF A SINFUL, DYING WORLD WHEN ALL ALONG JESUS HAS WANTED TO GIVE US THE PRECIOUS GIFT OF LIFE? THE DEVIL IS WELL AWARE OF THE GIFT OF LIFE THAT JESUS GIVES US, AND HE IS DETERMINED TO CONVINCING US TO SEPARATE OURSELVES FROM THE GRAFT OF GRACE THAT BINDS US TO HIM. FOR EXAMPLE, HE WILL ATTEMPT TO CONVINCING YOU THAT ALL THE STUFF OF THE WORLD IS MORE VALUABLE THAN JESUS. HE WILL ENTICE YOU TO CLING TO ONE RELATIONSHIP AFTER ANOTHER TO BRING YOU THE KIND OF SATISFACTION THAT ONLY JESUS CAN SATISFY. HE WILL DECEIVE YOU INTO BELIEVING THAT REMAINING IN JESUS ISN'T "COOL."

SO, WHAT WILL IT BE? WHERE WILL YOU REMAIN? WHERE WILL YOU LOOK TO FIND YOUR SOURCE OF LIFE, OR AS LUTHER WOULD SAY, WHAT IS YOUR GOD? WILL YOU REMAIN IN JESUS, OR REMAIN IN, WELL, . . . YOU FILL IN THE BLANK? TO HELP YOU AS YOU CONSIDER WHERE TO REMAIN, LISTEN ONCE AGAIN TO JESUS' WORDS IN OUR TEXT: (READ TEXT AGAIN). NOW, "SEE" THESE WORDS (HOLD UP THE BRANCHES). WHICH DO YOU WANT TO BE? IF YOU REMAIN IN JESUS, YOU WILL BE HEALTHY, GROWING, AND PURPOSEFUL. INDEED,

YOU WILL BE ALIVE FOREVER! ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN! (HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!) BUT IF YOU SEPARATE YOURSELF FROM THE GRAFT OF GRACE WITH JESUS, THE VINE, AND TRY TO FIND YOUR SOURCE OF LIFE ELSEWHERE, YOU WILL WITHER AND DIE.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST, LOOK CLOSELY ONCE AGAIN AT THE VINES. ONE IS ALIVE. IT'S READY TO GROW, FLOURISH, REPRODUCE, BEAR FRUIT, AND LIVE! THE OTHER IS DEAD. IT'S WORTHLESS, USELESS, AND READY TO BE THROWN AWAY AND BURNED IN THE FIRE. SO, LISTEN. BLOCK OUT ALL THE DISTRACTING CLUTTER OF THE EVIL ONE, AND LISTEN. JESUS IS CALLING TO YOU: "REMAIN IN ME!"

LET US PRAY: HEAVENLY FATHER, THANK YOU FOR THE GIFT OF YOUR SON, THROUGH WHOM WE RECEIVE THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS AND LIFE EVERLASTING WITH YOU. THANK YOU, JESUS, FOR YOUR STRENGTH, YOUR WISDOM, AND YOUR ABILITIES. THROUGH YOUR WORD AND SACRAMENTS, YOU POUR OUT YOUR GIFTS IN ABUNDANCE ON US. BY YOUR HOLY SPIRIT HELP US ALWAYS TO HEED YOUR GRACIOUS INVITATION: "REMAIN IN ME." IN YOUR HOLY NAME WE PRAY, AMEN.