

The Church: Centered in Jesus

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This Sunday's texts:

Psalm 73:21-26

Hebrews 1:1-3

John 15:1-8

The holy gospel for this morning comes to us from the Gospel of John, the fifteenth chapter:

[Jesus said to his disciples,] "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 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. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourself to be my disciples.

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, allow us, in fact, keep us close to you. Nurture our faith, our lives, our relationship, and our witness. Be always present in us so that we might know your presence and be encouraged to live to your honor and glory. Amen.

I have been known to say throughout my career that I am unapologetically Christocentric, to which most people roll their eyes. It actually came from a friend of mine. When I was in high school, my senior year in high school, I decided to apply to work on a ministry team with the organization Lutheran Youth Alive. In fact, while I served that summer of 1979 on Lutheran Youth Alive, I came to this area and we served at Emmanuel Saratoga for a week, doing various things. That's what we did as we moved from church to church throughout the summer with a team of about seven of us, sharing the love of Christ, often with youth groups, sometimes singing, not always the best. But that's what we did. The leader of that group at the time was Kevin Murphy. At the time, Kevin wasn't a pastor, but I, of course, respected Kevin, was grateful to him for the leadership of that summer. Later, when Kevin went to seminary and was being interviewed by the certification team, he was told that he was too focused on the second person of the trinity, to which he replied, "I am unapologetically Christocentric."

In truth, when we rightly understand the trinity, we flow in and out of the distinctions between the one true God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the various ways that God expresses himself. In Sunday School, I was taught that Jesus lives in my heart. Now, I'm very well aware that God didn't take the 5-foot, 9-inch Jesus and shrink down, so he's running around in my heart, but rather that's an expression of the Holy Spirit living in our hearts, always being present with us. And so we move back and forth. We flow back and forth. But as we do so, the whole Triune God gets the credit for all the various expressions of that God in the three persons of the Trinity. We know, for instance, that in the Old Testament, it was the Holy Spirit that spoke through the prophets to allow them to speak on behalf of God.

In Hebrews, our text today reminds us that “[i]n the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.”¹ Part of the reason for this testimony in the New Testament is to make sure that we understand that the God who became man, who taught his disciples, sacrificed his life, was raised from the dead, and set at the right hand of God, is, in fact, the one who has all authority, authority over heaven and earth, authority over angels, authority over you and I, and authority to be lord, to be king, to be the highest, the most supreme.

Later, in this same section, in the third verse, it says Jesus “upholds the universe by the word of his power.”² Now in the NIV, we put it this way. “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”³ When Paul was preaching to the Greeks in Acts, he used their very own poetic words to say “in Him, all things hold together.” Now I'm not a scientist and I certainly am not a nuclear scientist, but my understanding is that the smaller we get, the more we understand that these things are spinning around each other and held together. I guess, as again I'm no expert in this, but a nuclear bomb happens when you break one of those atoms and they spread out. This power that God has is unimaginable in our minds. Why do I make such a big deal of that? Because that power is at work in you and me. That power is being expressed out of God's love for us, both in us and through us in the world. We have this tendency to look in the mirror and say something like I'm not all that or often I'm not sure I can handle what's coming. So when we're

¹ Hebrews 1:1-2

² Hebrews 1:3, ESV

³ And now Hebrews 1:3, NIV

reminded of the very presence of God working in us and through us, we can be encouraged.

Indeed the book of Hebrews, throughout the reading of Hebrews, while it goes through an amazing history of those who have been faithful, it elevates Jesus so that we understand the superiority of Christ. As you're reading through Hebrews, notice over and over again that God's faithfulness expressed to us by taking on flesh and dying for us is the same faithfulness that continues at work in our world and in our lives. So keep your eyes open for that as you read through that amazing book. Then, of course, I remember, as I'm sure you do, that when Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and he said "[t]herefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you" he adds those words and remember "I am with you always, even to the end of the age"⁴ The powerful, almighty God present and at work in us and through us. As you read some of our church history and especially the desert fathers, one of the things that you will come to see in their writings is that many of them experienced times when they felt the absence of God.

So this is a time when we need to look at our *feelings* and put them alongside God's *promise*. Even though we may *feel* the absence of God, we may *feel* like we're alone or praying to a wall, in truth, God's *promises* that he's with us, that he hears us. So we need to bring our feelings into alignment with a faithful promise of almighty God and the truth that it represents. God is with us.

It is not a new word. It's expressed in a new way through the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, but even in the Old Testament, in our psalm for today, we hear that promise. I am always with you. It's expressed in this psalm when the psalmist is feeling very inadequate. He feels like he's messed up mightily. Anybody relate? And yet even here in the psalm, we see this gracious God. The gracious God is not only in the New Testament. God is gracious throughout both Testaments. The law, the requirements, the guidance of God, the instructions of God are not just in the Old Testament. They're in both Testaments, but we see in the New Testament is the fulfillment of the old. This desire of God to be in and with his creation is expressed in Old Testament and New.

So when we think about who the church is, the church is the called-out people, made new in Christ, and then sent out to the world to invite them to be the same. We are God's chosen people. The people of Israel were God's chosen people, but we're chosen with a purpose. Our purpose is to bring glory to the

⁴ Matthew 28:20

Father and our purpose as the church today is to point people to Jesus, who is Savior, Lord, God, and man. As we keep that at the forefront of our minds, we recognize this power that is at work for us and through us. Acts 1:8. You remember Acts is the second book in the Luke/Acts combination with Luke looking at Jesus' life and then Acts looking at the early church. In the first chapter of Acts, verse 8 reminds us. "[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you," just as I've been talking about. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit is there residing in you and then, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth."

As pastors, we're taught very clearly that the purpose of the church is to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. What we often can lose sight of when our noses are down a little too low, is that the church is not the institution. It's the people of God. The witness that will be born to the world and to the city and everywhere in between is not the witness of Saint Timothy's. It's the witness of the people of God which includes the people of Saint Timothy's. You.

I have often been taken back by this "bear fruit" command that we find in our gospel today. It says in verse 8, "This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourself to be my disciples."⁵ And I'm thinking "how much fruit have I really born?" As a matter of fact, by the way, as a youth director and as a pastor, often I'm told this line. It's meant to alleviate the guilt and burden of that statement. It is "you never know the ripple effects of the work you do for the gospel" which is true. It is true but if we're called to bear fruit and we're not sure we can see the fruit we're called to bear, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to bear that fruit? And if this gospel reading has anything to say about it, it's this. Remain in Christ. Abide in Christ. Dwell in Christ. As a branch to a vine, allow your life to be continually nurtured by being in Christ. Allow your mind to be continually challenged and encouraged and filled with the word of God, so that you can understand the heart of God for you and for the world, for all people. And continue to be fed by that word and by that walk.

I don't know if this is true in all churches. I grew up in a wonderful church, Saint Paul's Lutheran Church in Linwood. It wasn't until I was in confirmation and youth group at that age that I began to understand this personal relationship I could have with Christ, that he was always there to listen and even more importantly, that he loved me more than I loved myself and that he knew better even than I did what would make me fulfilled and happy in this life. That began

⁵ John 15:8

the very slow journey of submission to the will of God as I trusted in the love of God which is what I've encouraged people to do ever since.

Let me read you something from one of the commentaries this week. Do you want to bear much fruit for the kingdom of God? If the answer is yes, there is only one way to do that. Remain connected to the vine. There is no other way. The more connected and tied you are to Jesus, the more connected you are to his word in your life, the more fruit you will bear. This is the natural result of the connection. More remaining, more connection, more fruit.⁶ As an athlete, I spent many different times in various chapters of my life, training to do something well, whether it was being the catcher in baseball in Little League, being the center in water polo in high school, or even more recently training for some endurance things, like hundred-mile rides and triathlons, beginning where I could not do it and training until I got to the place that I could do it. Very specifically. Very calculated. Very much an effort.

What I'm learning is that's not really what I should expect in Christ. I don't know what tomorrow brings, but I do know that as I stay connected to Christ and his word, often I am provided whatever I need to discern the will of God in the moment that I need it. I'm not in charge. He is. I haven't gotten myself ready. He has prepared and equipped me.

Part of being in the word of God that I realize more and more in my walk is that wisdom comes often from God's people. When I study the word alone, I learn a lot. When I talk about that word with others who are studying it, I learn even more. It was the affirmation of God's people that allowed me to see what gifts God has given me and allowed me to use those to his glory. My hope is you will do the same for one another. As you abide in Christ, you will show one another when you see Christ showing up in your lives.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."⁷ Jesus says he is the source. If you feel discouraged, turn to him. If you feel strong and capable, turn to him. If you're seeking to find a way to encourage and strengthen a friend, be with them because Christ is with you and point them to Jesus. It is a long journey.

One of the elements that I used to include in all of the weddings that I did until finally a friend of mine whose daughter was being married by me said please don't put that in the homily. I had frequently put in my wedding homilies "life is not a bed of roses" and I would say "yes, it is. Life is a bed of roses with the

⁶ "What Did Jesus Mean When He Said to 'Remain in Me?'" Clarence L Haynes, Jr

⁷ John 15:5

beauty and the fragrance and the thorns and the manure.” I think the manure part was the particular part that she didn't want in her daughter's wedding, you, maybe, can imagine. Brothers and sisters in Christ, often when our lives feel dry, we need the manure. We need to be reminded that this road we're called to, this strength that God gives us doesn't mean life is easy. It means he's going to give us the strength in all kinds of ways from all sorts of places to continue to move forward, to grow in our faith and in our witness. He is the source of our life and strength. He is the source of love and grace and mercy. He is the power that will take us forward into his future. Thanks be to God. Amen