

*Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Mother's Day, 14.v.2005, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bregue, Pennsylvania
Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; I John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2*

Jesu Juva!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the
vinedresser. He removes every branch in me that
bears no fruit." Every branch that bears fruit He
prunes to make it bear more fruit . . . My Father is
glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and
become my disciples."*

– John 15:1,2,8

To continue with this brief series of agricultural sermons:
Saint Katherine's Evangelical Lutheran Church in
Oppenheim, on Germany's River Rhine, has been blessed
over the centuries with the donation of several fine
vineyards, so that today Saint Katherine's has its own
winery. As we find ourselves here smack in the middle of
the York County wine country, musing as we have been
about additional sources of church income, I wonder if we
should all be trying to do our part on the model of Saint

Katherine's Church, even if only in a small way. These, for example, are prunings from our vineyard, perhaps the tiniest vineyard in York County. They are *clippings* really, not prunings, for the time for pruning passed over two months ago. I had pruned my grapevines properly the past three years, just as I had been advised by an expert vinedresser and very successful right in this very Congregation. In '03, '04 and '05 I had pruned them in late February or early March, pruned them back so far that, to look at those four grapevines, one might worry that they would come back to life at all, when in reality they were very much alive and would flourish because of that severe cutting. This involves not only pruning away the dried up, dead branches, but also the ones with life in them, the branches with buds, ready to leaf out with the light and warmth of spring. This year, somehow, I had not the heart to do that, to cut away the living along with the

dead, and, so, our vines are leafing out all over and every which way. There will likely be not as many grapes this year, though I am sure that the wasps, the birds, the squirrels and the deer will find some.

There is a cost to the vine if it is to thrive and to bear fruit, not in what it does but in what it suffers or gives up. In its natural state, as in a patch of 'Mustang' grapes, only those outer branches that can be reached by sunlight will leaf out and bear fruit. The branches, most of them tangled in the dead branches of previous years, do not stand a chance, and soon they will join the thicket of dead branches themselves. Domestic grapes are grown so that sunlight reaches the whole vine, so that life and fruit-bearing is maximized. This was a practice familiar to Jesus and His hearers and handed down to winegrowers to this very day. Since Noah and his family of humans and animals and plants landed in the Ark on Mount Ararat,

that is, since the beginning of history, grapes had been domesticated in this way, grown for their fruit, for their juice and for that convivial beverage Noah discovered that results from a natural process that takes place when the juice of grapes is left alone under the right conditions, a new life process that results in *wine*.

In His parting words to His Disciples as we hear them in today's Gospel, Our Lord was speaking to people who knew all about vines and grapes, to people who knew that the vine has to suffer pruning if it is to flourish, and that a good and competent vinedresser will do this. 'My Father,' He says, i.e., *the Living God* of history, is just like that. Jesus is just like the grapevine. *We—disciples—are* just like the branches of that vine, both the living and the dead. Not just the survival but the success of the vine, the flourishing of the vine and the harvest it produces is paramount, no matter how difficult this may be, no matter

how much suffering the necessary pruning may cause the vine and branches, no matter how much pain it may cause the vinedresser, no matter how the Son may bleed and suffer an innocent death on the Cross, no matter how those once believing but now not caring disciples do not like being cast off and no longer called disciples, no matter how those who *do* sincerely trust God's love and practice it may wonder that they, of all people, have to suffer both in spite of and sometimes because of their faith, *no matter*, when it is time for the vine to be pruned it is Our Heavenly Father's duty and office to do what the vinedresser does.

Pruning must be done, and without delay, if there is to be a harvest. Suffering, the *Cross*, the vinedresser's knife, both in the form of the hard and inexplicable things of life *and* the Cross in its original and purest form, persecution for the sake of the Kingdom of God's mercy, is *necessary*. It is necessary for the result, for the goal, for

the 'fruit', for the meaning of our lives God that wills to be the end result of this sojourn. As someone has said, "The fruits of the Spirit grow on the tree of the Cross."

Christians, for most of Christian history and in most parts of Christendom, have understood this. Martin Luther's dictum that, "To whomever God loves, He sends Crosses, " has been accepted as self-evident by most Christians, and certainly by Lutherans whose own great tradition of liturgy and sacred song was forged in the crucible of the suffering of war

Two devoutly Christian nationalities in particular have accepted this call to suffering for the sake of the glory of discipleship, regardless of the cost. The Poles, Christians for over 1,000 years, and the Armenians, those descendants of Noah who first heard the Gospel from the Apostles Thaddæus and Bartholomew and who accepted it as a nation over 1,700 years ago, have both had the

experience of having their countries and removed from the map, having their people martyred by the millions and the survivors scattered around the world. More than ethnicity and language, more even than the high culture which both nations have produced, it has been their Christian faith and the bond of that faith in the Church, in the suffering Church of Jesus Christ and His Apostles, that has preserved them as a people. Through that very suffering, their faith has been deepened to a level perhaps more profound than when the Gospel was first preached and believed among them. It may be that other such Christian nations without borders are being born today . . . in Darfur, in Indonesia, wherever faith in the One Who commanded love of enemies makes disciples of Jesus Christ different, and hated because of that.

Christian nations are born through suffering *as* Christians. For us in this prosperous land and nation, built

on the bones of destroyed aboriginal nations and on the backs of black slaves, for us in what some dare to call a 'Christian country'--because Christians here have never been persecuted as such?—the idea of suffering and faith is a difficult concept. The Puritan fathers, taught us to see God's blessing in prosperity and God's punishment in adversity—an outlook unworthy of their Reformed, Calvinist faith, but what most people believed, nonetheless. As a nation, we have learned that lesson too well. God was seen to bless the settlers of New England in saving them from their Anglo-Catholic enemies by bringing them to these shores, by sending them the Indians as guides and friends who enabled them to survive, and then by granting them victory over their former hosts and rescuers. God's punishment was seen to be dispensed on the godless savages with every white victory, especially against the Pequots with the total liquidation of their main settlement in what

is now Mystic Connecticut by the righteous New Englanders. Rarely in our history have we publicly begged God to *save* our nation, whether from adversity or from ourselves, for we have assumed that whatever we have done and succeeded at has been the will of Almighty God. For us, that is the language of the Old World, as we still hear it echoed in the national hymn of our mother country (at LBW No. 568). Our prayer is, instead, ‘God *bless* America,’ as though fear of mortal danger were something to vex other nations, but not us. I expect never to drive behind a car with a bumper-sticker reading, ‘God save America!’ Until now, the closest our people ever came to this heartfelt prayer was in our own Civil War. The great hymn by Julia Ward Howe forged in the midst of that struggle and based on today’s Gospel text, found at LBW No. 332, was slow indeed in finding its way into American Christian hymnals—and not just because it would not sing

well in the South! The expectation of our national consciousness—and to a very large extent the expectation of our *faith*, even where the Church brings us up to know better—is that God will provide for our wants within the moral limits of what most people consider acceptable and, *of course*, for our actual needs with no suffering involved.

But, wherever there are people baptized into the True Vine of God's harvest, Jesus Christ, there is the Vinedresser, Our Heavenly Father Who *will save* the Vine of the Church and insure her harvest of faith by cutting out and casting away the dead and useless members and by pruning back the living through suffering over which the sufferer has no control. Will this come in the form of an epidemic against which we have no defense and for which we lack any clear plan? Will God's pruning hook take the form of a war without taxation or rationing or conscription, one which we may know how neither to win

nor end? Will that be the way in which we will learn to pray, 'God save America!' and perhaps become for the first time in our history, a 'Christian nation'?

Will the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church be reborn among us on the ruins of a church life that cannot be sustained simply on the basis of growth and institutional size and catering to wants and preferences based on the latest fad, an institution which collapses in upon itself where there is no sustaining core of faith? Will the Father's chastening work of love take the form in our lives of an experience, an insight or a painful turn of events that confronts you and me with those things in our life which do *not* belong to a living faith, those things of selfishness, wrath and despair which the Holy Spirit will lead us to *beg* Our Heavenly Father to cut out of our hearts and minds and to throw away forever so that we may live as the children of God we were created to be and born to be in

Holy Baptism, so that *we* may not be cast away but live? Today's Gospel calls us to be open to all of the above, but especially to those ways of bringing forth the Kingdom of Heaven of which God alone can conceive. And Our Lord assures His first Disciples and us that, whatever Crosses come our way, they are sent by the Father's love.

Today's Gospel closes with a curious statement: "My Father is glorified in this, that you bear much fruit and become my Disciples" (v. 8). What? Isn't Jesus speaking to His Disciples? Yes, He was *and He is*, here and now. If Our Heavenly Father calls us to glorify Him, to serve Him and make Him proud in so doing *through suffering*—and He clearly does—He is calling us to become what we already are. Always remember that! Remember that both when you feel at the end of your road of suffering, unable to endure more, *or* when you take those first frightened steps, just having become aware of the path

ahead. Those near the end of that way can be of tremendous help to those at the beginning, and it works the other way around as well. The triumphant witness of the Church both glorifies the Father and stands as a witness and sign of hope to us all. Where she has endured not just temporary setbacks but the trial of *great* suffering for the sake of the Gospel, where the Church emerges from that catastrophe and indignity as still the immaculate Bride of Christ her LORD, belonging to Him alone, now with a deeper sense of the infinite majesty and goodness of God, the Church pruned back as the vine of God's Kingdom so that the sun of grace may shine on each and every leaf, in her we can see the future toward which we ourselves may be called and that that future, no matter what happens, belongs to the One Who gave Himself for us. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!