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Maundy Thursday

John 15:1-5

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He 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. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will 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.

⁵**“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (NIV84)**

Theme: The Garden of Good Works.

If you were creating this Lenten series, “From Garden to Glory” and you were trying to come up with a theme and text for Maundy Thursday, you might have chosen something to do with the Lord’s Supper, since it was on that first Maundy Thursday that Jesus instituted the holy sacrament. Or perhaps you would have gone with “The Garden of Prayer or Gethsemane” since after Jesus and the disciples left the upper room they went to the Garden of Gethsemane so that Jesus could pray. Perhaps you would have done something with the term Maundy, which comes from the Latin for “command.” There are many different options, but you probably wouldn’t have settled on “The Garden of Good Works” as we have before us today. Yet it is appropriate for Maundy Thursday. Jesus said the words of our text to his disciples on Maundy Thursday when they were in the upper room. They are some of Jesus’ last words to his disciples before his death—words of comfort and encouragement. And part of that encouragement was to teach his disciples the proper place of good works—something we still need to be taught on a daily basis.

Jesus said in verse 4, **Remain in me, and I will 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.** The analogy is simple. In order for fruit to be produced, it must remain on the branch. And the branch must remain on the vine. For it is from the vine or the plant that the fruit receives all of nutrients it needs to grow. Without the

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vine the fruit can no longer grow. Instead it slowly decays. A branch cannot bear fruit if it is not attached to the vine.

The same stands for producing fruits of faith. You cannot bear fruit unless you are in Christ Jesus. It is impossible to do anything pleasing to God if you aren’t part of his vine. As he says in verse 5, **apart from me you can do nothing.** Nothing—nothing pleasing to God, nothing good in his sight, but everything you do is worthless. The Writer to the Hebrews said something similar in chapter 11. **Without faith it is impossible to please God.** An unbeliever may do the exact same thing as a believer, but it’s still a sin in the eyes of God. An unbeliever may even seem like a better person to others, but not to God. The believer, who is attached to the vine, produces good fruit, and the unbeliever—no matter what he does, produces bad fruit.

That’s because the believer does everything out of love and thanks for Christ. He is motivated by what Christ has done for him. Since Christ gave up everything for him, the believer will want to give up everything for Christ. He will love Christ just as Christ first loved him. Christ’s suffering and death leads the believer to obey him. His motivation is the gospel. He’s not motivated for selfish reasons. He doesn’t do good to impress others. He isn’t kind to others in hopes that others would do good for him in return. No the believer obeys the Lord because the Lord wanted him to do so. So he willingly and cheerfully does it—not expecting anything in return, nor trying to earn his way to salvation.

But that’s not the unbeliever. It may not appear so, but the unbeliever does whatever he does out of selfish reasons. He does good works because it feels good. He does it because it’s expected of him by society. He does good so that others would notice him. Or so that others would reciprocate his good works so that they would do nice things to him in return. Ultimately whatever the unbeliever does is done for selfish reasons. They aren’t done out of love for Christ, therefore they are not pleasing to God—no matter what they are.

The only reason why our good works are pleasing to God is because they have been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. Remember what Isaiah says about our good works in chapter 64. **All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like**

filthy rags. What we do is by its very nature a sin. That's because it's done by sinful human beings. Even our best is sinful. Even what we think is great is actually disgusting and detestable in the eyes of God. But they are washed by Christ's blood. He makes our actions acceptable in the eyes of God. He washes away our sins. So it is because of him and him alone that we are able to do good works. The same can't be said of unbelievers. They don't believe so they don't receive the forgiveness of sins through faith. What they do is not made good in the eyes of God. Their actions remain filthy rags. What they do is still detestable in the eyes of God. So an unbeliever cannot produce good fruit. Without him it is impossible to please God.

So the Garden of good works begins with Jesus. You must be connected to him in order to produce good fruit.

So what do we do? We stay connected to the vine. For it is through the vine that you are fed and nourished. And how do you remain connected to the vine? It starts by remaining connected to the Word. To remain connected in the Word is more than just attending worship every week or so. It also includes reading the Word at home and studying his Word in Bible Class. Because you are only fed as often as you are in the Word. And if you only hear the Word on the Sundays you attend worship—then you aren't being fed much nourishment.

Getting into the Word should go without saying. As a Christian you want to remain connected to the vine as much as possible—it's something you do cheerfully. You would never go a day without feeding yourself, so why would you ever want to spend a day without getting spiritually fed and nourished from the vine? But at times it seems as if I am beating a dead horse. That I keep on saying the same thing over and over. But there is a reason for that. There are many things in our world today that vie for our attention. And often God and his Word loose out. Our priorities get all out of whack. We would rather stay connected with our friends and family than God through his Word. We are often more involved with our jobs, hobbies, or our kid's activities than we are God and his Church. And before you know it, we're connected to the vine very little if at all.

So we get connected to the vine as often as we can. But even that won't assure that we bear good fruit. In a garden you can do all the right things. You can have the right amount of nutrients in the soil, water it properly, and so on. And the plant still might have bad fruit. The same is said of Christians. We are connected to the vine. We are spiritually fed through the means of grace on a regular basis. But we still bear bad fruit. We still fail to obey God's Word. Our works aren't always good but bad. Our fruit is often rotten.

And what do you do with bad fruit? You throw it out. You can't eat rotten fruit. It's worthless. So you want nothing to do with it. You hold the same view about your sinful rotten fruit. You want nothing to do with your rotten fruit. So you throw them out—you want nothing to do with your sinful actions. We get rid of your sins, flee from them, and turn to the true vine—in other words, you repent. In this way you are pruned by God so that you may bear good fruit. Jesus mentions this in verse 2, **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.**

And when we fail to bear good fruit we turn to the Lord. And we receive the fruit of the vine—the wine of the Lord's Supper. It was on that same night that our text for today was spoken that Jesus gave us his true blood in, with, and under that fruit of the vine. And together with his true body in, with, and under the bread, he has given us the very thing which he gave up and shed on the cross. We turn to the Lord because he gives the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper. It is the Lord who forgives us freely. And it is through faith in him that we receive the forgiveness of sins. Through him we are made clean. As he says in verse 3, **You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.** Christ has paid the price for our sins. And his righteousness is credited to us. He makes our rotten fruit into good fruit. And that leads us to produce even more fruit.

You may not have picked the theme “The Garden of Good Works” for Maundy Thursday. Yet it is very fitting. For we daily need the reminder and encouragement to bear good fruits of faith. And the only way to do that is to remain connected to the vine. So get the Word and receive the sacrament. For through it the vine that makes you, the branch, and your fruit clean. Amen.