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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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John 15:1-8
Afflictions and Troubles in Our Lives

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me,
and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me
you can do nothing. (John 15:5, RSV)

This sermon is about afflictions and troubles in our lives, in case you should have any of those guys! Before I launch into this topic, I need to offer a clarification – a kind of cry of humility: If I manage to give you some encouragement about afflictions and troubles, please understand that I am speaking to you and to me. That is, the gospel is first and second-person discourse. It is about you and me. It is not about third persons. And that is important to say following this sad week — this sad week when thousands died in the earthquake in Nepal and when so many lives and property were disrupted by the turmoil in Baltimore. Why there are natural disasters in this world and why there is evil in this world goes beyond this particular sermon, and probably goes beyond my ability to comprehend. I can try to speak about that in another sermon or in a classroom setting. For now, I simply want to speak of you and me. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, but sometimes the Vinedresser prunes the branches.

In my sermon this morning, I have been helped along by Martin Luther. Luther loved the Gospel of St. John. He believed that this Gospel sets forth the message of God's love and mercy with great tenderness.¹ In his work as a theologian, Luther had recommended that preachers regularly preach on St. John. In 1537, Luther got his own chance to do the preaching – more of a chance than he had reckoned on, and one that almost killed him. Before I turn to the particular lessons I have learned from Luther about this morning's passage from John 15, let me linger a little to tell you the story of Luther and his sermons on the Gospel of St. John.

In 1537 Luther's pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), was called away to Denmark, to help bring the Reformation there. Elector John Frederick gave Bugenhagen permission to do this on the condition that someone would be left in charge of the church – its liturgies and the pastoral care of the people. Bugenhagen asked Luther to do this, with the understanding that Bugenhagen would be gone for five months. Luther had been near death with illness a few months before, but

¹ Editor's introduction to LW 23

by the time of Bugenhagen's request, Luther felt recovered enough to fill in for his pastor.

By way of comparison, this would be like me, say, ten years ago, asking Pastor David Lotz to fill in for me while I would take a five-month sabbatical. All of Dr. Lotz's responsibilities as a Professor at Union Seminary would remain in place. All of Dr. Lotz's family and professional responsibilities would remain in place. His essays and his books and his lectures would all remain to be written. But in addition to his already-heavy load, he would now be responsible for Immanuel Lutheran Church – for the liturgies, the preaching, and the pastoral care of the people.

So, Luther did this. He carried all those responsibilities for the five months. But the thing is, Bugenhagen did not return after five months. In fact, he did not return for almost exactly two years. After the first year, Luther sent a note to his friend Justus Jonas in which he said this:

we are overwhelmed ... with cases and duties, to the point of weariness. As an old man who has served his stint (*senex et emeritus*), I should prefer to devote these days to an old man's pleasure, observing the miracles of God in the garden."²

It was not to be. Luther did everything at once in those years, 1537-38: He led the Reformation, served as a Professor at Wittenberg University, wrote his treatises and vast correspondence, all the while taking care of Bugenhagen's church and preaching on the Gospel of St. John. That's the good part of this story for us. These three-volumes of Luther's Works – Volumes 22, 23, and 24 – contain Luther's sermons on St. John from these years.

So, let me tell you some of the things I have learned about our particular text from Volume 24 of Luther's sermons on St. John. I want to lift up three of Luther's themes about Christ being the vine and we being the branches. The first and third of Luther's points are meant for our encouragement. The middle one is meant as a caution and an exhortation that we should abide in Christ.

Luther's opening encouragement concerns the blows and discouragements that sometimes come the way of Christians. Luther does not want us to think that any of these afflictions are simply troubles that have somehow slipped on by our heavenly Father and done us harm. Luther does not want us to think that our God slumbers from time to time, with the result that we get injured. Indeed, Luther wants us to understand that nothing that befalls us is somehow random or meaningless or the unlimited work of the devil. Rather, Luther encourages us to

²Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.); Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.); Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 22: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1957 (Luther's Works 22), S. 22

think of the troubles of life as the tender care of the vinedresser who prunes the dead, dry branches so that we can flourish even more.

Here is Luther's opening paragraph about that:

[Our Lord Jesus] interprets all the suffering which both He and they are to experience as nothing else than the diligent work and care which a vinedresser expends on his vines and their branches to make them grow and bear abundantly. With these words Christ wants to teach us to have a view of the affliction and suffering of Christians that is far different from what appears on the surface and before the world. He says that Christians are not afflicted without God's counsel and will; that when this does happen, it is a sign of grace and fatherly love, not of wrath and punishment, and must serve our welfare.

In a charming way, Luther then imagines the vine with the power of speech. The vine sees the vinedresser approaching with his hoe and his clippers and is frightened. Luther expresses the dismay of the vine this way:

Ah, what are you doing? Now I must wither and decay, for you are removing the soil from my roots and are belaboring my branches with those iron teeth. You are tearing and pinching me everywhere, and I will have to stand in the ground bare and seared. You are treating me more cruelly than one treats any tree or plant.

To this lament, Luther imagines the vinedresser answering:

"You are a fool and do not understand. For even if I do cut a branch from you, it is a totally useless branch; it takes away your strength and your sap. Then the other branches, which should bear fruit, must suffer. Therefore away with it! This is for your own good."

But the vine still objects:

But I do not understand it, and I have a different feeling about it.

To which the vinedresser declares:

But *I* understand it well. I am doing this for your welfare, to keep the foreign and wild branches from sucking out the

strength and the sap of the others. Now you will be able to yield more and better fruit and to produce good wine.

Luther then applies his lesson to us:

This is indeed a fine and comforting picture. Happy is the Christian who can interpret it thus and apply it in hours of distress and trial, when death upsets him, when the devil assails and torments him, when the world reviles and defames him as an apostle of the devil. Then he can say: "See, I am being fertilized and cultivated as a branch on the vine. All right, dear hoe and clipper, go ahead. Chop, prune, and remove the unnecessary leaves. I will gladly suffer it, for these are God's hoes and clippers. They are applied for my good and welfare."

Luther admits that his stance requires "the art of believing." But if we *can* believe it, then we can be comforted to think that life is never out of control, and that even the worst that can happen to us is within the power of our God to work to our ultimate flourishing.

So, that is Luther's first point. He encourages us to interpret the troubles of life as the Vinedresser's taking good care of us.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Luther's second theme is a word of caution to us. It concerns that word "abide."

Abide in me [says Jesus], and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (John 15:4, RSV)

If in this passage, Jesus calls us to abide in him, he thereby suggests that it is possible for Christians to slip away from him. They do not abide in him, but drift away, like a boat whose rope comes untied and so the boat drifts away.

Of course for Luther and for that generation of the Reformers, the big temptation to be worried about was works righteousness. Luther feared that if Christians were not careful, they would begin to put their trust in their piety and virtue and would end up having no need for Christ, which means that they would no longer abide in Christ.

The danger of works righteousness is always a danger. Perhaps also we could add that if we are not careful, we might drift away into some form of idealism apart from Christ. We look up one day and realize that the hill we are willing to die on no longer has much to do with the Jesus we learned about in the Bible and

in the teaching of the Church. We believe and feel deeply about such-and-such a matter, but alas, the questions should perhaps still be raised: Are we really abiding in Christ?

A FINAL WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Luther's third point is, again, a word of encouragement to Christians. He wants us to be pleased to think that if we do abide in Christ, our deeds in this world will constitute a holy ministry unto God himself. What a status! To be a holy servant of God. Luther points out that that was the ambition of many a monk in his day and many a proud mother of a new priest:

How many people on earth would like to have the distinction and the glory of being called servants of God through whom He is honored and praised! And how we ourselves toiled and labored at this before we discovered how to serve God! Everybody was striving to become a holy priest, a cleric, or a monk, or always to endow many churches and contribute for their support, in order to have a share in this honor. How blessed a mother regarded herself when her boy was to read his first Mass! She had given birth to such a son and had provided God with a servant!

Luther invites us to realize that we do not need holy orders to be a true minister of God. We do not need to say our first Mass, wear a stole, wear a bishop's mitre, or anything glorious like that. What we really need is simply to abide in him. And so, Jesus says this to us:

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit... (John 15:5, RSV)

How do we "abide" in Christ? St. John gives us at least two principles to live by. First, we should seek to draw near to Christ in the Holy Sacrament. So note that word "abide" in this saying from John 6:

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. (John 6:56, RSV)

The second principle is that if we would abide in Christ, we should follow him in deeds of love in this world. So, again, notice that word "abide" in this passage from our Second Lesson, from 1 John 4:

¹⁶ ...God is love, and those who abide in love *abide in God*, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:16, NRSV, from this Sunday's Second Lesson)

If, then, we will throw in our lot with Jesus and trust our salvation over to him, we are thereby freed, at last, to turn to works of love in this world – works of love that will be useful to humanity and bring glory to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.