Stay Connected To Jesus!

Dear Friends of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

The Bible uses many vivid pictures to describe our relationship with God. Last week we learned that we are beloved sheep of the Good Shepherd, who watches over us and cares for our every need of body and soul. In baptism we are adopted into God’s family of believers. He becomes our dear Father and we become his dear children. The Bible also describes us as living pillars which together make up a spiritual building, the Holy Christian Church. The Apostle Paul describes us as fellow members of the body of Christ, of which Jesus is the head. The Bible also pictures us as the beloved bride of Christ with whom we now enjoy a most blessed fellowship. All of these pictures emphasize the rich blessings which God lavishes upon us by his grace, as well as the close personal connection we now enjoy with our precious Savior, Jesus Christ.

Well, in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus paints another beautiful picture of our personal relationship with him. Jesus said in John 15, “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.” This picture pretty well says it all. With this comparison Jesus makes it clear that he is our only source of spiritual life and strength and every good thing we accomplish as Christians. It is vitally important therefore that we remain in Christ always through the power of the Gospel. Through these words then the Holy Spirit encourages us—,”Always Stay Connected to Jesus.” *

Spring is a beautiful time of the year because we see all the trees and bushes, formerly lying dead and dormant during the winter, now budding forth with new life. Our warm March weather has pushed many trees ahead of schedule, so they are now in full bloom. It is obvious however that these blooms did not produce themselves. Rather they sprung forth from a healthy vine, a healthy tree. Living vines produce living branches. And it also obvious that if we were to cut a branch off from its vine, it would lose all of its life and vitality. Very soon, it would shrivel away to nothing. Here is an example of a branch which I cut off from a tree on Monday. Once green and healthy, it is now dry and
dead. You see, the branches must remain in the vine to stay alive. The branches must remain in the vine to stay healthy. The branches must remain in the vine to bear fruit.

And so it is with us Christians, and our relationship with Jesus. We are not Christians by our own thinking or choosing. We didn’t spring forth to spiritual life on our own by making a decision for Christ. No, we were born dead in sin and steeped in unbelief. We were by nature, objects of God’s wrath. But God made us alive through the power of the Gospel. He chose to give us life through the living and enduring Word of God. For many of us, God worked this wondrous miracle in our hearts through the waters of Holy Baptism, which the Apostle Paul describes as a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. That’s why baptism is so vitally important. It is a means of grace by which the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts and connects us to the living vine, Jesus Christ.

And that same powerful Gospel which made us alive in Christ through baptism also now keeps us closely connected to Jesus through the Word and the Lord’s Supper. It is a undeniable fact of life that plants and trees need water to survive. Without it, they will wither away and die.

In the same way, it is spiritual fact of life that our Christian faith will wither away and die if we cut ourselves off from God’s Word and sacraments. That is why we are most concerned when our fellow believers stop coming to worship or attending Holy Communion. Neglecting God’s Word puts your faith at risk just as surely as forgetting to water your house plants causes them to shrivel up and die. We don’t teach a “once saved, always saved” mentality. Christians can lose their faith and will forfeit the blessings of the cross if they willfully continue to cut themselves off from the means of grace. That’s why our elders call and visit members who are absent from worship. That’s why all of us want to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to come and worship our Lord regularly. We understand the spiritual facts of life. Jesus said, “If a man remains in me and my words remain in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.” It is obvious that many Christians don’t fully grasp these spiritual truths. So many are content to worship on Christmas and Easter, and neglect the rest of the year. So many fall into a bad habit of taking the summer off from worship and Holy Communion,
without any regard to the consequences of their relationship with Christ. Jesus said it very clearly – “**Remain in me, and I will remain in you**”. In fact Jesus used that word “remain’ 8 times within the 8 verses of our text today.

No one would ever think of watering their house plants on Christmas and Easter only. No one would ever expect their garden to thrive if it received no water throughout the entire summer. Why is it then that some Christians are content to take the summer off from God’s house and God’s Word? May we never adopt such a complacent sinful attitude towards our relationship with Jesus. Instead let us take to heart the words of Martin Luther in his explanation to the Third Commandment. **We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.**

We understand the consequences of spiritual neglect, but what are the **benefits** of ongoing spiritual growth? Once again, let’s visit our gardens. What happens when you regularly water and fertilize your plants? What happens when you pull out all those pesky weeds which threaten to sap them of their strength? Your plants thrive, right? They grow up strong and healthy, and in time, they will produce abundant fruit.

Jesus says it works the same way in our relationship with him. As we are fed and fertilized regularly by God’s Word and Holy Communion, Jesus empowers us to grow and mature into healthy fruitful Christians. Consider some of the blessings of the cross Jesus brings to our hearts and lives through the Gospel. Isn’t it refreshing to know that your sins are forgiven? Wouldn’t it be terrible to go through life always burdened with a guilty conscience, always wondering where you stand with the Lord, always worrying if you are good enough to be saved? We don’t have to struggle through life with such doubt and guilt and uncertainty. We know, “**as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us**.” We recognize that already now our citizenship is in heaven. We enjoy peace with God, freedom from guilt, and the sure hope of eternal life, all account of the perfect life and sacrificial death of our dear Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Every time we come to worship, we are reminded of these saving truths. Every time we come to the Lord’s Supper, we receive Christ’s love and
forgiveness once again in visible personal way. We need this continual assurance to overcome our doubts and to keep our faith alive and strong and growing.

What about dealing with hardships and difficulties in our lives? Where can we find strength to weather these storms of life and overcome them? Once again, Jesus strengthens us to stand strong, firm and steadfast through his powerful word and promises. How would we ever cope with the death of a loved one, if we didn’t have Christ’s promises to uphold us in our time of need? Just consider how many times a word of encouragement from the Bible has lifted you up when you needed it the most.

Keep in mind also that God’s Word does not merely provide information. It also provides motivation, it is God’s own power for Christian living. Where can couples find the faithfulness they need to love, honor and cherish their spouse for life, especially when difficulties threaten to derail their marriage? Where can young people find the strength to overcome the powerful temptations which this world throws at them, so that they can lead pure and decent lives in words and actions? Where can troubled Christians find the patience and forgiveness they need to let go of grudges, bitterness and ill will against people who have wronged them, so they can learn to forgive and to resolve conflicts?

All of these blessings; the strength, the purity, the integrity, the faithfulness, the joy, the love and the self-control come from the vine to the branches through the power of the Gospel. Set aside some time then each day to stay connected to Jesus through his Word. He will give you the daily attitude adjustment you need to avoid every sinful path, and to gladly do God’s will from the heart. Peter reminds us in 2 Peter 1:3, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who has called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

A healthy tree will produce good fruit. Likewise healthy Christians will produce many fruits of faith - good works to God’s glory and for the benefit of others. Now we are always careful to point out that our good works do not earn God’s favor or forgiveness. Jesus fully earned God’s favor and forgiveness for us by his redemptive
work on our behalf. No, Christians are eager to do good works to say thank you to Jesus for all the blessings he showers upon us by his grace.

Remember, fruit doesn’t make a tree alive, but a living tree will bear fruit. Likewise, our good works don’t make us Christians, but healthy Christians will produce good works, lots of them. In fact, God made us alive in Christ so that we might bring forth many fruits of faith. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul writes, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Eph 2:10

This means that God places many situations in our path in which we have the opportunity to glorify him and reflect his love to the people around us. Embrace these opportunities. Pray that the Lord would use you to be a blessing to the people he has placed into your life. In whatever role God has assigned you, parent or child, spouse or worker, leader or student, strive to carry out that role faithfully with the gifts God has you. Yes, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God!

A wise gardener will also carefully prune his vines so that they will become even more fruitful. His intent is not to destroy the branches, but to actually help them grow stronger. In the same way our heavenly Father prunes us Christians, not to destroy us but to help us develop spiritual maturity, so we can produce even more fruits of faith. Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while very branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” John 15:1-2

Jesus’ words remind me of one year when we decided to grow some pumpkins. Starting out, the pumpkin vine produced many long branches sort of like legs of an octopus. But many of those branches were unfruitful, and if we would have left them unattended, we wouldn’t have gotten much fruit. So we decided to prune back most of the spindly branches, so that just one healthy branch remained. That pruning process really did the trick, because now that healthy branch grew stronger and produced for us a nice sized pumpkin.

So what does it mean that our heavenly Father prunes us Christians? It means that he may allow trials and difficulties to come into our lives. At the time we might not
appreciate this pruning process. We might prefer that we never have to face trials and setbacks in our lives, that everything should always just go “hunky dory”. But our heavenly Father is a wise gardener, and he understands what is best for us. He understands that sometimes this pruning process is necessary to rid us of some pesky sinful habits or some self-centered attitudes. He prunes us to help us grow closer to him and to lead us to spiritual maturity, to empower us to become even more fruitful Christians.

Don’t expect then that your life on this earth will be a bed of roses. In this world you will have trouble. You must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. But be assured that whatever God sends your way he intends for your spiritual and eternal good. The Apostle Peter, who experienced his own share of troubles in life, confirms this truth for us in 1 Peter 1:6. He wrote, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Christians friends, it is so important to remember that what God ordains is always good. Otherwise, when troubles come upon us, we might be tempted to think that God is punishing us for our sins, or that perhaps he has forgotten about us in our time of need. But nothing could be further from the truth. Remember, that God is always looking out for our best interest. God is not going to punish us for our sins. He already punished Christ in our place. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! And our heavenly Father, who made us his dear children in baptism, will certainly never leave us or forsake us. No, in every situation of life, good days or bad, we can be assured of God’s faithful love and tender care.

Don’t despair then when God prunes you back. Don’t give up hope. Rather, trust in the Lord with all your heart, cling to his sure promises, and strive to honor him in every aspect of your life. Yes, always stay connected to Jesus and he will empower you to remain a faithful and a fruit filled Christian. Amen.