

* Today is the Fifth Sunday of the great Fifty Days of Easter. Friends, guess, what is my favorite number? While you might be puzzled with my favorite number, let's guess what is my favorite passage from John's Gospel? It is easy if we take into account a fact that the Gospel reading for today comes from John, chapter Fifteen. Friends, while many leaders of the Missouri Synod, including some of you, are puzzled with promotion how to save the church from its decrease in numbers, we've received the answer. Are you kidding?, you may say. No, I am not. Surely the Lord told us what to do. For three and half years Jesus had been with apostles teaching them many important things including this topic. Thus the apostles received the commandment to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah promised long ago. The disciples, in turn, had begun to grasp this truth. They also learned that in order to be saved they have to abide in the Master's words. But there are still so much to learn! Friends, time is moving out door quickly, let's go for knowledge and wisdom.

* The entry of our text is significant as we realize that God himself is speaking to us in the flesh without a mediator. By the very words of His mouth we received life-breathing knowledge. Meanwhile there are tons of books in the world written about Jesus by millions of authors, however, all together they are less significant in the presence of God's breathing words about himself, even having been said allegorically. "I am the bread of life, he says, "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the way, the truth and the life," "I am the door," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the light of the world," "I am the true vine." In summary, the seven figurative sayings of our Lord about himself were found throughout John's Gospel. Each metaphor is unique and helps us to see the kinship between Jesus and his flock from a different perspectives. Each teaching gives us a particular insight into the nature of Christ. So it is when Jesus taught about being the "true vine."

* Here are some comments that might have value. When Jesus would use the allegory of a vine and its branches the listeners knew what he was talking about because the majority of his listeners were accustomed with Scripture. Thus devotional Jews regularly gathered together in their local Synagogues on the Sabbath day for praying and reading the Scriptures, (Lk.4:16). Jesus' listeners knew that the vine symbolizes fruitfulness or serves as a picture of Israel. Here is a number of references on this account you may want to read at home, (Psalm 80:8, 14; 128:3; Is.5:1-7; Ezek.17:8; Joel 2:22; Zech.8:12; Ma1.3:11). Using the allegorical way of speaking was common for the

ancient mind; those people could easily draw the connection from agricultural images to revelations.

* Based on our own observation we also can easily understand Jesus' allegorical saying due to its simplicity and clarity. It is not a secret that branches must have a vital connection with a trunk in order to produce fruits. If a branch is broken, it withers and dies shortly. This analogy tends to say that Jesus Christ is the source of fruitful life. Jesus is the true vine, the genuine vine, in whom our life is found if we believe and trust him. So it is with all believers: we are one body in Christ, intimately, as a branch is with a vine. The fruitfulness of each branch depends on its relationship to the vine, who is Jesus Christ. This metaphor powerfully contributes the two master doctrines, - 'justification' and 'sanctification.'

* Now let's see how the imageries of vine, branches and gardener contribute to understanding the two chief doctrines, justification and sanctification. The reformer M. Luther considered the first one as "... the prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines;" According Paul's teaching in (Rom 11:17-25) we, who are not Israel by nature, were implanted into the nourishing root of the olive tree, which is another imagery of the Lord. As it was mentioned before, the foreign branch can produce fruit only if it was grafted and adapted. Accordingly, there are two sequential steps in the process of grafting and adapting. The first step was made by Jesus Christ on the cross, he suffered and died for our wrongdoings. In (1Co 15:3) Paul says, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." Jesus shows us his love by the very act of dying on the cross for our transgressions. This is the first step of our salvation. Two thousand years ago until now, the divine decree of pardon has been proclaimed to this world. Christ died "for the sins of the whole world," (1Jn 2:2). Saying figuratively, you, foreign branches, rejoice because the genuine vine became available for grafting into it!!!

* From my past I remember how my father-in-law grafted a branch into an apple tree. Particularly I remember how he made such a surgery because in that moment I focused my eyes on his hands. He made a cleft on the trunk as long and as deep as one centimeter or so; then he shaped the end of the implanted branch as a wedge; third, he inserted it with force into the cleft at an angle of almost 35° to the parent tree. Lastly he covered the conjunction with a grafting compound and wrapped it with tape to the scaffolding branches to give it more strength. No doubt such work demands hands in this particular case, the hands of my father-in-law.

* In order to be implanted, God gave us hands. Excuse me for this figurative slang but it is not a joke, it is true. The Father gave us personal faith that works as hands. The second step was made by our hands-faith when the good news was grasped-believed. We've believed that Christ died for our trespasses and was raised for our justification, (Rom 4:25). This is the apostolic proclamation, (1Cor 15:3; Rom 10:12-13). God gave us active faith as a gift to believe in Christ as our personal Saviour, apart of any imaginable merits. So we've heard the message and believed. That's it. This is how we were saved from the view of objective and subjective justifications. Again, Christ died for our transgression on the cross, or saying symbolically the vine became available, this is the first step. The second is that by given faith we believed the apostolic message and because of that we were received as the beloved of the Father, or saying symbolically, the branches were grafted by the gardener and adapted by the vine. That is how we are saved from views of objective and subjective justifications.

* There is another challenge ahead, the doctrine of sanctification. Friends, imagine numerous clusters of grapes on a grape vine or, if it's hard to do, just look at the cover of your bulletin. See, the vine is so laden with grapes. In Russia, seasonally, we liked to go outside of town for apples. For just a little cost we could fill up our jeep with apples. I remember some apple trees in the garden; they were so laden with fruits that their branches were weighed down almost to the ground. That is what God wants us to be – laden with the fruit of His work in us!

* In (v.2) of our text Jesus says, "Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he (the Father) takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." And in (v.5) he continues, "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." The meaning of the word 'fruit' here and elsewhere in the NT is associated with charitable love, gracious love, agape love. This love was revealed by Jesus when he died for us, (v.13). One of the purposes of Christ's death and resurrection is that his own have the plentiful life accompanied with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control, (Gal 5:22.23). These are all sweet tasting and sweet smelling products of cooperation between the branches and the living power of the root. Without your contribution, love will not be shown and without the Holy Spirit we are not able to love. That is how the spoken picture of sanctification looks. In summary, both justification and sanctification work together as two pivoted blades of scissors which slide against one another producing the cutting effect and movement ahead, toward the final point.

* Friends, when God created the world he made it for a purpose. And what is the main purpose, you may ask? Some answer that in the moment of creation God wanted to share his cheerful existence with living beings. Some say that God made the world because of his creative personalities or just for pleasure. Some people say that God desired to multiply his likeness through human beings, creating many gods. But I think the chief purpose here is for glorification of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Significantly, the last five Psalms from the book of Psalms are all about God's glorification. By means of praise, exaltation and worship, we human beings glorify God. When reading Psalms or our text from John, you may notice that God is glorified when human or nonhuman beings function according to their personal mission or assignment. For instance, the sun and moon glorify God when they produce or reflect light and energy. Friends, glorify your Lord, glorify! It is a commandment! How do we glorify God, by mouth? We glorify God, not primarily by going to church and singing praise songs and old classic hymns. In the first place we glorify God by bearing fruits, and the more the better, (v.8). Our Sunday worship to the Lord would be only drama if there would be found no love, joy and peace among us. Therefore, if we brought forth even a little fruit, the Father empowers us so that we'll be able to bring more. As a gardener our Heavenly Father cleanses and purifies us by the words of his mouth, (v.3), even right now. The Word is powerful, "... living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword," it enables to judge and even put to death, (Heb 4:12).

* After all, the same Word urges us to ask God whatever we wish and it will be given to us. (v.7); Once Solomon was told by God, "... ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you." Solomon asked for wisdom and he received it, even vastly greater, because his petition pleased the Lord, (2Ch 1:11, 12). Having been adapted as the children of the Father, let's be neither doubting nor mistrusting to His words asking for wisdom or anything else according to his will, (James 1:5,6). In this latter sense the wisdom is revealed in us if we continue to glorify God and his Son Jesus by obeying the Word, "... love one another as I have loved you." Amazingly, the answer is found, and now it becomes clear, that in order to save our Synod as well as our St. Luke's from declining, it is necessary to love one another as the Lord Jesus loves us, (v.12). "Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you," (2Co 13:11).

Amen