**John 15:1-8 May 2, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, John chapter 15 here re-reading these words. “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The first words of our Introit today read, “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” How do you say goodbye? As a child it was an obligation. After a family event or party, on Easter, Thanksgiving or Christmas Mom made sure that my brothers and I said goodbye to all of our relatives. This made leaving almost like a relative scavenger hunt, tracking down Grandma as she was cleaning up in the kitchen, finding Uncles hiding out in the basement or in the garage, tracking down Aunts and cousins as they were upstairs. It wasn’t much more than a few words and a hug, before running off without giving it a second thought. Later on in life, goodbyes were harder. We moved when I was in 1st grade from Michigan to Minnesota, and I remember the sadness of saying goodbye to my best friend, even at a young age. We moved again when I was in 5th grade from Minnesota to Michigan, this time I was looking forward to a new adventure, but still I had to say goodbye to everyone I knew and the friends I had made. Since then I’ve been blessed to live in Wisconsin, Indiana, Texas, Kansas, and now back in Michigan. Each place meeting new people, growing close to them, and having to say goodbye. I’ve always echoed the sentiments of these words from our Introit, that I would see them again someday, that I’d come and visit, but that hasn’t always been true. Goodbyes are hard. You can do everything in your power to prepare people for them in your relationships, but when the time comes to go away, it’s never easy. We experience that here on Earth in our own relationships with each other and with our family and friends. But it is necessary. You can’t stay and abide here on Earth forever. You will have to depart.

We’ve been faced with this reality the past few months as we’ve lost members of our congregation. Our church family has grown smaller, as these were our brothers and sisters in Christ. We’ve had funerals, committals, and there are more in May. For some we were blessed to see them, and others we never really had a chance to say goodbye. We never had that final moment and closure of seeing them for what we knew would be the last time. We aren’t promised that experience, for any of us here today, this could be the last time we get to see each other, this could be our final goodbye to each other as we go on our way this morning. We just don’t know. We live in a world of sin, of violence, of disease, of accidents and death. We don’t know what the future holds. We have to always be ready to say goodbye.

The Easter season is a long one of rejoicing and celebrating the return of Jesus Christ in His resurrection from the dead. It’s a wonderful time in the Church Year, but this Sunday, the fifth Sunday of Easter is when we reach a turning point. We’re over the halfway point, and now Jesus prepares us for when he says goodbye. He didn’t stay here in his physical body as the disciples experienced him, and Ascension Day looms on the horizon. The festival part of the Church year is swiftly coming to a close. We too must be reminded of this truth, that while He rose from the dead and walked, ate, and taught the disciples, he went back to heaven to prepare a place for His children. He didn’t abide here, this was not his kingdom or resting place. There was better to come.

If you think our goodbyes with each other and those we know and love are hard here on Earth, imagine how the disciples must have felt when they said goodbye to the very Son of God. That’s what makes the teaching of this particular Sunday so important. Here we are talking about a deeper connection and relationship than just a friendship or even the bonds that earthly families share. While it’s not wrong to emphasize our relationships with our earthly families and treasure them, it’s wrong to speak of them as the only thing that matters. It’s wrong to think that life revolves only around our relationship to those that share our blood. We are part of a deeper family with a deeper connection, a connection beyond our understanding, but here illustrated with these words from John chapter 15, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

It’s a significant moment in the relationship of a child and their parents when they go off to college. By this point in my own life my mother had passed away and I remember my Dad driving me to Mequon, Wisconsin. I got all set up in my dorm room. We went out to eat, he got me some stuff for my dorm room, and then that was it. We said goodbye, and off he drove. I remember going back inside the dorm, sitting down in my room and it just kind of hit me that I was now in many ways, on my own. I didn’t have a car, I wasn’t living in my Father’s house, I was going to have to figure it out. When children leave the protection of their parents it’s a question of if they can do things on their own. I couldn’t call my Dad to do something for me, he was 10 hours away. I had to figure it out. Apart from him the question was could I learn, grow, mature, and thrive in the work that was set before me, to study how to be a pastor.

That’s the example of our earthly relationships with our earthly families, it’s a test to see how we do without them, and we prove that we can function without them doing things for us. The temptation is to see that relationship the same as what we experience with God. The truth is, in our relationship with Christ, He is the vine, we are the branches. A branch without a vine is a stick, or a withered branch, or garbage, or better defined, dead. It can’t do anything! But we hear a contrary message everywhere else we go. We hear the whispers even in our own hearts of how we can make ourselves greater in the eyes of God based on what we do. What is the Bible? How is it perceived? Not everyone sees it the same way. Some see it as just a self-help book, a means of finding a better life for yourself, and if that is what it is then God’s Word is all about how you can do more and accomplish more based on all of your own power and abilities. It’s unlocking the potential within yourself. It’s doing more outside of your relationship with God. If there’s one rallying cry that we hear in our world today, it's not to submit to the Will of God, or to humbly seek the help of others, it’s to be unapologetically your best self. To do you and be you despite what anyone else says. The concept of not being able to do anything unless you are tethered or abiding in with or under someone else is blasphemy! You don’t need anyone! You never did! You are the boss of yourself. You don’t need to be dependent on anyone, you are strong and perfect just the way you are.

And this way of thinking may define your relationship with others, and your friends, or coworkers, or how you run your business or your life. But it can’t define your faith. It is a lie to see your salvation being achieved by your own works or anything you do. What you do, outside of Christ, is nothing. You are dead outside of his love and provision for you. Which brings back this whole theme of abiding with God and how it’s different than the relationship we have with each other here on Earth. When we talk about God abiding with us, it’s to say that our relationship to him is complete reliance. There is no life outside of him, there is no hope, there is no future, there is no….action or purpose unless He is with us. And He is where He has promised to be, in His Word, and in His Sacraments, given for you here in His house. And the relationship is so deep and so interconnected, when we talk about this abiding nature of how we are connected to God, that it is as if we are a branch connected to the living vine. It’s to say that even while he is gone, he’s not gone, because he abides in us. In our hearts, in our lives, in our faith, in the forgiveness we receive, in the words that He still speaks to us from His Word, in the cross placed upon us in our Baptism, in the body and blood that we eat and drink, that resides in us, that abides in us. This is deeper than just, remembering how Grandma smiled, or your friend from childhood who told the funny jokes. This is deeper than seeing family on holidays or even multiple times and having casual conversations. You aren’t connected to them like you are with Christ because Christ has given his very body and blood for you to eat and drink! To strengthen this connection, to forgive your sins, to remind you of the life you have with Him and that He sacrificed himself for you!

That’s deeper than anything we can experience here on this Earth from anything in all of God’s creation. And what it really means, is that even though he says goodbye, for a time, physically, even though he says, “A little while, and you will see me no longer.” We can know with certainty that, “Again a little while, and you will see him again.” And that you will see him as he truly is, in his glory, when he returns to come here to take you to be with him. Or you will see him, when your time on this earth ends, and you no longer have to abide here, but instead get to abide with him in heaven. He’s still with you, even if he has said goodbye, because he abides in you, he remains with you, and his promises are never broken. This season will end, the white will go away, but he remains always, your Savior, your shepherd, your Lord, the vine, the source of your life, the one who abides with you.

Amen

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.