

If you’ve been around Ken Mawr for any length of time, you’ve heard me repeat these familiar words of our Lord when we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”* I’m repeating verse 5 from last Sunday’s Scripture reading because it is so critical. *“Apart from me you can do nothing,”* says Jesus. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero.

Of course, some people are perfectly content with *doing nothing*—watching the world go by. And it also seems there are a number of Christian people who live in a way that their faith is stored on a USB drive in their heads. They know they can access it when they need it, but it’s not really visible to the naked eye. It rarely if ever becomes tangible. That kind of Christian faith, I believe, is contrary to the gospel that Jesus taught and lived. The “stored in your head” type of faith may only be a stage in the development of one’s faith, but it most certainly cannot be the finished product. Indeed, when those of us striving to follow Jesus live a life of *“bearing fruit,”* that “fruit” is validation of our faith.

Suppose you are totally paralyzed and can *do nothing* for yourself but talk. And suppose a strong reliable friend promises to live with you and do whatever it is you need done. How would you show gratitude to this friend if someone came to visit you? By trying to get out of bed by yourself? No, you can’t. You would say, “Dear friend, please lift me up, and please put a pillow behind my head so I can look at my guest?” Your visitor would learn from your requests that you are helpless and that your friend is strong and kind. You show gratitude for your friend by needing him, by asking him for help, and by relying on him. Essentially, we are paralyzed & incapable of bearing fruit without Christ. We ask God to do for us through Christ what we can’t do for ourselves. Jesus said, *“Apart from me you can do nothing.”* Nothing that really matters, anyway.

When Jesus and his disciples leave the upper room and move toward the Garden of Gethsemane they pass the temple. One of the central ornaments of

the temple which they saw is a “golden vine with a cluster as large as [an adult male],” says Earl Palmer in his book *The Intimate Gospel*. This decoration becomes the basis of a visual parable that Jesus tells. Jesus’ intimate relationship with these 12 men cannot be stated in prosaic theological terms. So, as he has done all throughout his ministry, Jesus uses a common motif to illustrate spiritual truth. His union with his disciples is as alive as the relationship of a vine to its branches. As I mentioned last week, in the Old Testament Israel was frequently spoken of as the vine that Yahweh loved and tended. But their waywardness and corruption made God’s people lifeless. Jesus is the *true vine*. His Father owns the vineyard and cares for it. His highest purpose in growing and tending the vineyard is that it will “bear fruit.” So, the branches that bear no fruit he cuts off (v. 2). Branches that are dry and lifeless “*are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned*” (v. 6). This would appear to be the final judgment on those who do not *remain* in Jesus. Once these branches had beautiful green leaves and flourished, but they have cut themselves off from the Source of life and they are barren and dead.

I have been in a battle with a wild grapevine in my backyard for 30 years! Seriously. I have ripped wild grapevines from the Rose of Sharon hedges that encircle our driveway too many times to count. Because it grows so quickly, I can’t seem to keep up with it. No grapes, mind you, just a vigorous wild grapevine, but it has withstood my snipping, pulling, chopping, and pouring weedkiller onto the roots for decades. Every year it grows back! Jesus said, “*I am the vine.*” He is like a vine that has withstood centuries of persecution and abuse, witnessed all sorts of atrocities by us humans, and continues to grow back in spite of the lack of respect he’s been given. In ancient Israel the growing of grapes was a central source of life & well-being for the people, so when Jesus referred to himself as the vine, they knew exactly what he meant.

In western Pennsylvania our primary livelihood comes from manufacturing, medicine, and agriculture. In Pittsburgh Jesus might refer to himself as the factory, the operating room, or the field, instead of the vine. Our lives are

dependent on them for survival and if we disconnect, we lose our primary source of life and well-being. Jesus also told his disciples that they could not bear fruit *unless they remain in him*. When we disconnect from Jesus, we lose something vital. We are cut off from the life-giving source of God's sustaining love. Then our faith becomes weak, and we lose hope, and begin to die. Have you noticed that many people are lost these days? They're trying to find answers and a sense of belonging, so they seek out all sorts of activities for security. They cling to vines that are either false or short term. They reach out for silk or plastic vines, or perhaps ones that simply exist in their imagination. They fill their lives with all these counterfeit vines but still come up empty.

You may have heard this story from me before. A four-engine jetliner is halfway to its destination when the pilot's voice comes across the loudspeaker (which is usually not all that loud), "Those of you on the left side of the plane have probably noticed that one of our engines has failed. Please, don't be alarmed. We can still fly on three engines, but we will probably arrive 30 minutes late." A few minutes later the pilot's calm voice was heard again: "Those of you on the right side of the plane are probably aware that a second engine has failed. Please don't be alarmed. We can make it on two engines, though we will probably be at least 1 hour late now." A few minutes later the pilot again speaks to the passengers: "It has just come to my attention that a third engine has failed. Please don't be alarmed. We can make it to the airport on one engine, however, we will arrive approximately 1 ½ hours late." One passenger turns to another and says, "Boy, I hope that fourth engine doesn't fail, or we could be up here all night!"

Think about it. When traveling on a plane, we are completely dependent on the mechanics who service the plane's engines and on the expertise of the pilot. We have to totally rely on a machine that is way too heavy to be flying through the air and will come down if there's a mechanical or electrical failure. When we go out to eat, we trust that the chef is providing good fresh food. When we switch on an electrical appliance, we depend on the manufacturer's skill to

make something that won't blow up in our faces. When you think about it, we are dependent on so many other people.

Which brings me to the last line of verse 5 and the point of this sermon: Jesus says, "*Apart from me you can do nothing.*" Notice he didn't say "you could check in and check out whenever you feel like it." Of course there are people completely separated from the vine doing their own thing. Without a connection to the vine, they may sadly not survive. And there are those whose faith is totally private—folks who make no mention of their faith and hardly ever get involved in the mission and ministry of the church. So, the question I'm left with after looking at this passage all week is this: "What is the opposite of *doing nothing*?" It's not doing any old thing we want to do. It's doing what branches that are connected to the vine are meant to do, which is to bear fruit. Jesus plainly says in verse 16, "*I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*" There you have it: Jesus says we are to *bear fruit*. We represent the Savior wherever we go and whatever we do. When we do that, our faith becomes contagious. Rev. Dr. Bob Downs heard Jesus say in Matthew 25, "*I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me,*" and he simply couldn't *do nothing*. So, he spent years ministering to inmates at the Allegheny County Jail. Today we are glad to dedicate 25 Life Recovery Bibles in memory of Pastor Bob for the jail chaplaincy. In a way, Bob is still bearing fruit!

When I was a boy my dad pruned the peach, apple, and pear trees in the small orchard next to our house. I was amazed how ruthless he was when it came to pruning those trees. He cut off all the chutes growing skyward leaving only the thicker branches growing toward the earth. Not long after the pruning, the trees grew leafy branches and blossomed into fruit hanging from the new growth. Jesus is telling us that all the useless foliage in our lives needs to be cut away. It might be acceptable for others to run down people behind their backs or to participate in activities that cause others to stumble and fall, but those things must be pruned away if we are to grow the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience,

and all the others. To produce the kind of fruit the Holy Spirit gives, the Father prunes away what is dead to grow the fruit of the Spirit. Of course, it's vital that we stay connected to the vine.

I believe our society is doing us a tremendous injustice—for this reason. Society conditions us to believe that we can go it alone. Society teaches us to be autonomous people. Alan Noble writes in his book titled *You Are Not Your Own* that, “Our society is a constructed environment built for humans who are their own and belong to themselves” (p. 69). Problem is, as Noble points out, “a society committed to the belief that we are our own and belong to ourselves will develop into a hyper-competitive society, one in which we all must fight for survival, validation, meaning, attention, and affirmation” (p. 78). Jesus insists that life is gratifying and brings us great joy when we rely on him and stay connected to one another. If you pay attention to people in a community where there has been a tragedy, like the train derailment in East Palestine last year, you will see togetherness, cooperation, and teamwork. Faith is meant to be lived in a community. But it's still necessary to prune the branches to grow more fruit. To grow the kind of fruit the Holy Spirit gives, the Father prunes away what is dead to produce the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, and all the rest. Fruit-bearing matters to Jesus because he says, “*I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*”

Wikipedia says, “The term ‘Jesus nut’ was probably coined by American soldiers in the Vietnam War. It was the first war to feature large numbers of soldiers riding in helicopters. ‘Jesus nut’ is slang for the main rotor retaining nut, or mast nut, which holds the main rotor to the mast of Vietnam-era helicopters. If the ‘Jesus nut’ were to fail in flight, the rotor would detach from the helicopter and the only thing left for the crew to do is to *pray to Jesus.*” If Jesus was speaking to soldiers today, instead of “*I am the vine,*” he might say, “I am the main rotor retaining nut.” All of life depends on him. His life flows into us through his Word and Spirit. Remember that Jesus said, “*Apart from me you can do nothing.*” Nothing that really matters, anyway. Amen.