

## Branches of the Vine

John 15:1-8

On campus you will see posters that say, “We’re a culture, not a costume.” This came from a 2013 program for Ohio University entitled “S\*T\*A\*R\*S\* for “Students Teaching About Racism in Society.” The posters show people from various cultures in clothing which we normally stereotype them with and then in clothing like typical youth. The idea is to teach us to not fit people into racial stereotypes.

That is certainly something people have done. Because some people, prominent in the movements during World War 1 to overthrow governments and put an end to war were Jewish. The Nazis blamed the Jews for their defeat in the war and instigated the Holocaust. Most of those who worked to free Africans from slavery in this country still thought that the Africans were mentally inferior to whites. Wars continue to take place in Africa because people are from different tribes and stereotype each other as evil. And we have all probably heard the story of the man who came into a church dressed in rags with long unkept hair and a beard. Everybody looked away from him as if he was infected with the most contagious disease. Yet the book of Hebrews tells us, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some have met angels.”

However we stereotype people, Jesus gives us a description of what we are to be. “I am the vine; you are the branches.” The outside of the branches looks like the outside of the vine. Leaves on the vine look like the leaves on the branches. And they should, because the branches exist and continue to thrive because of the vine they come from. Cut off the branches from the vine, and they die.

But do we look like Jesus? What kinds of stereotypes do people have of us as the branches of Jesus? And if that is so, then what do they think of Jesus?

In many of our schools we are taught that religion in general and Christianity specifically is the cause of so much suffering and pain in this world. They note how churches interpreted the Bible to show that Africans were the descendants of Noah’s son, Ham, who was cursed for laughing at his father. They used that to justify slavery. Or they look to how the Crusades caused fighting in the Middle East that continues to this day. Then there is the image of the ‘megachurches’ with pastors who have huge salaries and who seem to preach that if you are faithful to God, you will be rich too. Or they see how legalism from Christians spoke against interracial marriages, affection between people of the same sex, and oppressed women. They see in the Bible where St. Paul says, “Women should be silent,” and use that to say that the Bible promotes the denigration of women. As many have said, “The biggest hypocrites are Christians.” Others say, “If you are a follower of Christ, is there enough evidence to convict you?”

The story is told of the pastor who went to visit a farmer who belonged to his church, but wasn’t coming to worship. The farmer told the pastor, “I won’t go to church because some of the people in your congregation are such hypocrites. They act good by going to church, but aren’t good neighbors.” The pastor asked the farmer if he could buy one of the farmer’s pigs. The farmer said, “Sure, if you can afford it.” The farmer showed him some of his best hogs, but the pastors refused until he saw one runt. “I’ll take that one,” the pastor said. “And I will tell everyone I bought it from you.” The farmer replied, “But that’s not fair. You can’t rate my stock from that runt.” The pastor replied, “But you do that with our congregation.”

So often in our world people represent Christianity by its worst examples. Professors will depict Christianity by its most extreme forms. But that is not an excuse for us to be hypocrites ourselves. Jesus has called us to be His witnesses to this world. We are His branches. But how often do people see

the person too busy to help; the one who talks kindness, but does not act it; the man who goes regularly to church, but has little time for his family; the woman who goes to church, but gossips a lot; the student who talks religion, then gets drunk each weekend; the person who never gets in trouble, but does little to help others? Do we look like Jesus or like a dead branch that is really cut off?

Yes, there are a lot of dead branches on us. We don't always let God nourish us to keep us "green" and alive. But what is important is not the branches, but the vine—the one who upholds us—Christ Jesus. He tells the disciples: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

I have used this illustration before, but to me it gives a wonderful idea of what Jesus does for us. In the front of our church we have a beautiful altar window. It is so dominant that it is hard to see the cross above the altar. This is a special cross, because it is more than just a cross. We see growing on the cross a vine with branches. The cross upholds the branches. Without that support the branches would stay on the ground, rot, and not produce fruit, but the cross is what upholds us.

Not only does Jesus uphold us, He gives us the strength to really "do" something with our lives. Jesus speaks about His Father being "glorified." In the Bible the word for "glory" comes from the word for "heavy." If you intensify the word for "heavy" is means "glorify." When something is heavy, it makes an impact. The heavier the furniture, the more of a mark it makes in the carpet. The more "heavy" God is in in our lives, the more impact He makes, the more He is "glorified" in us.

I can take a tightened string, and it will just sit here. But if I pluck it, it will make a sound. However the sound is so small, that it makes little impact. It isn't "heavy" enough. It can't be heard. But if I place behind the string a special box like a guitar or violin,

it focuses the vibrations and turns it into a sound we can hear.

Jesus is not only the one who has placed us a His strings, as His forgiven people, in places where other people live, He is also the "guitar" or "violin" that takes whatever small effort we make because we love Him and makes "music" in this world, a "music" that can turn around other peoples' lives.

Two of the most beautiful times of year here in Iowa are spring and autumn. Both provide bright colors. In some ways autumn is better because of the clear, cool weather. When it does get cold, it brings frost which may kill some plants, and kills the bugs and bring crispness to the air. But the beauty of autumn is the beauty of death. Leaves turn color because they are dying. In spring the beauty may be more subtle, but it is the beauty of life, as small buds turn into flowers and then small leaves form.

Jesus rose on Easter to give us life. "We are a culture, not a costume." He came not to make us look good on the outside, but to turn us into new people. That "newness" is not going to be seen so much in success and being good, but in being people who are forgiven, people whose lives point not to themselves, but to the vine, Christ Jesus. For we are branches of the vine.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman  
April 29, 2016  
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center  
Ames, Iowa 50014