

# Fifth Sunday of Easter

## ON THE CORNER OF BRANCH AND VINE

John 15:1-8

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

## Analysis by Chris Repp

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

---

*And the vine became a branch and bore fruit among us... – John 1:14, paraphrased*

## DIAGNOSIS: Dead Wood

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *Fruitless*

*Vinegrower: “Well look at this. This branch does not have any fruit on it.”*

To me this pericope is the quintessential Crossings text. To put

it another way, it was this text (together with Matthew 12:33 “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.”) that convinced me that the Crossings matrix proceeds from Scripture, rather than being an imposition upon it. Not only is a tree, or vine, known by its fruits, but a problem with its fruit-or its lack of fruit-is the sign of a deeper problem. So it is with us. Jesus wasn’t really talking viticulture here. He was talking about us. The way we act, especially how we treat one another and the world around us, reveals something deeper about us.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Withered**

*Vinegrower: “Hmm. I see the problem. The branch is withered, as if it were already cut off from the vine. No wonder there’s no fruit.”*

So if there’s no fruit, what’s the problem? If we treat people badly, what’s the underlying reason for that? Do we fear that if we are generous, there will not be enough for us? Do we fear that if we are patient or kind, we will be taken advantage of? Do we fear that if we are not self-centered, if we don’t “look out for #1” (ourselves), that we won’t be cared for? All of those sorts of fears turn us in on ourselves, as Luther said, or “shrivel us up”—in this vine imagery.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Cut off**

*Vinegrower: “Well, I guess there’s nothing to do but cut this withered branch off...”*

Ultimately the problem with being turned in on ourselves, or shriveled up, is that it isolates us-not only from others whom our fruits are meant to feed, but also from God who is the source of all those good things we fear being deprived of. If we will insist on being withered branches, merely taking up space,

then we must be cut off from the vine to make room for branches that will produce.

## **PROGNOSIS: Living Branches**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Grafted in*

*Vinegrower: "Yet look, here is the vine who became a branch, and bore fruit among the other branches. He is not withered, but still bears fruit. And yet he has been cut off. I will graft him back into the vine."*

Comes Jesus, the vine who became a branch to bear fruit among us, the branch we withered-ones deem necessary to be cut off from because we did not like his fruits-feared them, even. So we killed him. But God raised him up. (Peter said as much in Acts 4:10) The branch we cut off, the Vinegrower grafts back into the vine

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *Getting What We Need*

*Vinegrower: "And for the sake of the vine who became a branch, I will also graft all of these other branches back onto the vine. Who knows, perhaps they will take what they need from the vine to produce the fruit I intend."*

Out of great love for the vine-who-became-a-branch the Vinegrower has mercy on us withered branches, whom the vine/branch claimed as his own. Instead of casting us into the fire where withered branches ought to go, he cleans us up with his word (v. 3), shaves off some of our dead wood, and grafts us also back into the vine. There we find sap to revive our sorry, shriveled selves. "Receive the Holy Spirit," we heard Jesus tell the disciples on the Second Sunday of Easter. Whatever we need to make the fruit, Jesus is more than happy to provide. (Note: This "whatever you ask for I will give" is not a "prosperity" gospel guarantee of self-serving goodies. That only leads again

to withering. This promise is always and only about helping us produce the fruit that is our purpose – and our joy.)

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Fruitful**

*Vinegrower [sometime later]: “Look! A flower. And another one here. I think this might be working!”*

When withered branches are grafted back into the vine and the sap begins to flow, it’s only a matter of time before the fruit begins to appear. They can’t help it, those formerly-withered branches. It just happens. So it is with us, when by the grace of God we are baptized into Christ and the Holy Spirit begins to blow, we cling in faith to our Lord and his promises and can’t help loving others as God has loved us. (So the Augsburg Confession, Article 6, says: “[We] also teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits...” Emphasis mine.)

P.S. Our task as the church (see Augsburg Confession, Article 5) is to respond to the ever-worsening news of steps 1-3 by proclaiming the Good News of Step 4, so that steps 5 and 6 can happen. By faithfully communicating the Gospel we facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit, whose job is to create the connection of faith between us and God-in-Christ. We are to be, in the words of this text study’s title, the Church on the corner of Branch and Vine.