

THE VINE

I am so glad and grateful that, for many of you, Pentecost is a great day, no matter how much or how little our world may celebrate it. I have friends who think it strange that Christians do not make a greater celebration over Pentecost than they do for Christmas. But it has not worked out that way, so only deep within the Christian fellowship itself is Pentecost remembered and celebrated. The disciples were waiting around Jerusalem, wondering what to do next. Jesus had been crucified, and all their hopes of a Messianic Age were dashed to pieces. No Righteous Warrior was coming to kill off all the bad guys, set things right, and make a wonderful world of brotherhood and peace. We keep forgetting to wonder who among us would survive such a purge. Anyway, back to reality ...

And then the Risen Christ started appearing in various ways and places. Gently, quietly – as was His way – not disturbing the world order at all. But more and more of them encountered the Risen Lord. What could it mean? He had not been the Messiah; He had been killed – defeated. Yet He was Resurrected – alive again – still knowing them and caring about them. That was far more – far greater – than anyone had ever expected of any Messiah. It was terribly disorienting! Nothing was happening like it was supposed to. It is hard when life is so confusing that we cannot tell whether to grieve, or celebrate – whether to cry, or shout for joy. And what does it mean in the normal cycles of our own days? Do we still get up in the morning, eat breakfast, go to work? Should we still raise our families, invite each other to dinner, and go to the movies, or should we be organizing some vast march on Washington? He is risen! And surely life can never be the same again. On the other hand, it has been fifty days since Easter – this Day of Pentecost. The sun keeps rising, the bills keep coming in. What to do?

So the disciples hung around Jerusalem, wondering if they should be back in Galilee, fishing. Then on Pentecost, like tongues of fire, the Spirit fell, descended, came upon them. JESUS ON THE OUTSIDE HAD BECOME JESUS ON THE INSIDE. The next phase of this campaign would be conducted not by Jesus of Nazareth, but by the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ – the same Jesus, but personally available at all times to each and every one of them ... and to each and every one of us. This is the birthday of the church, the dynamism that created the church – the power of the Holy Spirit that transformed a tiny band of bewildered devotees into a world religion that swept

through and took over the known world within two hundred and fifty years.

And yet ... as it won, it lost. Or more accurately: As it wins, we throw it away. Each time that the Holy Spirit guides and directs us to effectiveness beyond our wildest dreams, we turn away from the Holy Spirit and go back to our own ways. Upon finding success, acclaim, power, money, and resources, we “take back” our allegiance and devotion and try to manage and control things our own way. We organize vast Ecclesiastical Dominions. Every denomination that gets successful enough wants to switch over from spiritual to political power. Jesus taught us how to die, even demonstrated what that could mean in extreme circumstances. But we keep turning our dying back into killing. Jesus conquered by the Cross, but Constantine decided he knew better and, painting crosses on the shields of his armies, he went back to killing instead. Ever since that day, Christendom seems more eager to follow Constantine than Christ. If we kill Jesus’ enemies, Satan wins. Only if we convert them does Jesus win.

True conversion is an *awakening*. There is no way to cheat or pretend it. If it is not genuine – if it is not from within – it does not count, nothing comes of it, and it does not last. What is the true church? It is Pentecost: each individual in communion with the Holy Spirit; each individual in allegiance and obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus because they *want* to be, more than anything else on earth – in life or in death. The church is not what any of us can name or see on the outside. The church – whether millions of us or only two or three of us – is people who walk each of their days in willing obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus. If that is not what we are doing, then it doesn’t matter how high we jump, how loud we shout, how marvelously we sing, how impressive our buildings or organizations – if following the Holy Spirit is not what we are doing, then we are *not* the church.

Pentecost begins the church. Humans cannot produce it! The Spirit descended upon them. They did not go out and capture it and bring it home. Then it spread. People heard about Jesus and were amazed at the peace and love of His followers, and many of them wanted to be part of it. They asked to be baptized. Then what? Then we gave them Bibles, creeds, membership buttons, and pledge cards? Told them we had all the answers and that everybody else was wrong and going to Hell? Taught them to hate in the name of love?

That is *not* the process that repeats over and over through the pages of the New Testament. In the wake of the baptism, **THEY RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT**. That was the big deal! That was what drove it all. That was what changed Peter's mind and made him welcome the Gentiles (when Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit). That was what changed the life of the Apostle Paul. That was the story of the early church. Not that its saga was perfect, or anything close to perfect, but the apostles were not peddling a perfect theology; they were wrong about a lot of things. What they were right about was that the Holy Spirit would come to anybody who sincerely opened their lives to it. *That* is the church. Nothing else is the church.

Well, no use crying over spilled milk, as they say. Even if that milk is what Jesus came for – and lived and died for. And the amazing thing is that we can still get into it ourselves, if we want it badly enough. The offer is still open. The Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is still available, and is always eager for us if we are eager for Him. Knowing that and trusting it, we can still invite others into the New Life – the LIFE of the church. Only, we have to be careful about using that word “church.” Lots of people in our time do not know that “church” *means* the people of Jesus – the people who walk by His Spirit. They think it means an organization, a building, a denomination, a creed, or some set of beliefs that separates the sheep from the goats. They forget, if they ever knew, that Pentecost is the birthday of the church. And that Pentecost is about *receiving* the Holy Spirit.

Today, instead of talking more about Pentecost as a historic event, I want to suggest a kind of meditation for us. You see, I think most of you *do* want to walk by the Spirit. Having some comprehension and also some experience of what the church is really about, we love it, and we want to go on walking in the WAY. But our problem is that we get out in the false world and it's hard to keep remembering that our little lives really matter. What difference does it make whether we walk by the Spirit in the midst of the vast business of the world? Does Syria have the bomb? Will we find a cure for cancer? How many unwed mothers can dance on the head of a pin? How do I raise my own children to live well, to live successfully, in a world like this? And so it goes.

Naturally, Jesus has His agents – followers who walk by His Spirit – in all these arenas of life. And if *we* walk by the Spirit, we will be involved in it somewhere too, wherever He sends us. But “the big

picture,” as we often call it, is not the real picture, and certainly not the eternal picture. How faithful we are is what matters, not how well we think it’s going “out there.” Part of the problem is we never really know *what* is going on out there – how it’s really shaping up. Only the Spirit sees such things clearly. We just take orders, one day at a time.

So Jesus gave us a wonderful word-picture for this very thing – a parable for Pentecost and all we have been talking about. Since we are not in any special crisis, no more so than usual at least – and since the only way Jesus is “coming soon” is if He comes into our own lives and hearts – maybe the most helpful thing we can do today is remember the word-picture He gave us, and use it to get refocused, calm, patient, and joyful in His presence.

“I am the vine, you are the branches.”

Let the image sink in for a while. Let it have all the room it needs in your mind. The Spirit of Christ is like a great vine with its vast trunk system encircling and crisscrossing the earth in every direction – yet gently, subtly, just barely out of sight. It carries nourishment for the soul to every part of the globe – love, peace, beauty, truth, courage, hope, endurance, forgiveness, power, mercy. Do you need any of those things? We are all like little branches attached to the great vine, able to draw as much as we need or want from the source of all power and life.

This is the truth of how it really is with the realm of the Spirit. Of course, we could get literalistic and hung up on the details. A vine and branches is not *literally* it. But Jesus says that the spiritual realm is something *like* this. We can understand all we need to if we go with the image. It is a spiritual vine, not limited by space or time. It is real, but not in a physical way – it is far more real than that. It is available, but never coercive. We can go on about our lives with no awareness or acknowledgment of the presence of the vine if we want to. And we can detach ourselves from the vine any time we want to.

However, the flow of nourishment between the vine and its branches depends upon our staying attached: gratitude, commitment, obedience, prayer. By our awareness and gratitude and trust, we increase the flow between us and the vine. If spiritual energy gets low, it is because we forget or refuse to drink from the vine. We do not always like to admit it when we have shut ourselves off. On the other hand, it is wonderful to know what’s wrong, so we can open up to the vine once again.

Now, if Jesus had wanted to be a popular preacher or teacher, He would have stopped right there. It's all very pleasant, very true, very helpful. But Jesus never leaves what we call "well enough" alone. So here comes the Gardener. Isn't that exciting? There is always a "Gardener" in Jesus' stories, one way or another. Jesus never leaves out God. This time God, or perhaps the Holy Spirit, is the Gardener.

Sometimes the Gardener plants, sometimes he cultivates, sometimes he irrigates or spreads plant food. The Gardener does many, many things. In this particular story, the Gardener is pruning. Clip, clip. Snip, snip. Some of the branches are saying, "Oh, thank you!" Some are just saying, "Ouch!"

Some of the branches are saying thank you because they are tired of carrying the deadweight of past mistakes, dead ends, and old efforts that no longer produce anything. And they are glad to stop pouring energy into offshoots. Some people call them "suckers," I guess because we are a sucker to keep pouring life and time into things that will never bear any fruit. It is wonderful for the Gardener to clear out all the tangle and get rid of all the false goals we "sucker" into. Then we can get on with what we are really here for.

Why do some of the branches scream "Ouch!" with such dismay? It doesn't make much sense, but I have done it often enough myself to know why. Afterwards it gets pretty clear, but at the time of pruning, I frequently think that the Gardener is cutting at the wrong places. I could do it better myself, I say to myself, though I never seem to get around to it. And sometimes I forget that it takes grapes to make communion. I start concentrating on the branch that I am: how many twigs and leaves I can grow; how lush and green I can get. In short, we start thinking we are here to *acquire* things. We forget we are here to *bear fruit*. In that frame of mind, we deeply resent the Gardener.

How sad that some people talk as if pruning were the wrath of God. Pruning is not punishment – it is improvement. All of us who prune our own physical gardens know this. Though we cut off much that looks wonderful at the moment, pruned branches are healthier, they soon far surpass the condition of an unpruned branch, and they produce far more and much better fruit. Pruning, after a short period of discomfort, is a great favor – as long as the Gardener is doing it. That is, the branches ought not to take it upon themselves to prune other branches. You probably have no idea what I'm talking about. In any case, when the Gardener prunes, it is not punishment – it is an act of love.

Does the Gardener ever say to you: “You are trying to read too many books, watch too much television, see too many movies. You are trying to keep up with too many friends, appease too many relatives, be good at too many things. Prune back. Simplify. Get focused. Get back with ME. And you will be healthier, happier, more effective. And you will produce far more fruit.”

I only ask because sometimes the Gardener says things like that to me. I am not a mindless branch, and so the Gardener often asks for my cooperation. Then if I pay no heed but stay on the vine – that is, if I will not take a hint but still essentially want to be faithful – then the Gardener starts pruning. Clip, clip. Snip, snip. “Ouch! Oh, now I remember. Sorry, Lord. No, it’s okay. Go ahead.” And then finally I remember: only if He *stops pruning altogether* am I in real trouble.

The truth is, any branch that stops drinking in the nourishment from the vine begins to wither. Even if we know the truth but try to live it by our own power and wisdom, we begin to wither. Forgiveness out of the depths of our own understanding; offering help to others out of the pity of our own compassion; love out of the affection of our own benevolent hearts; ambition out of our own need for fame or glory – we do not carry enough sap within us to do such things very well, for very long. Only if the vine inspires us and fills us and backs us with its endless flow can we manage such things.

And so the truth comes back in full force, in all its grandeur and pathos, in all its hope and terror: “*No branch can bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains united with the vine... APART FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING!*”

I wonder what our world would be like today if all the Christians would step away from all the missions they have NOT been sent on. The only thing better would be if we also stepped up to the missions we HAVE been sent on.

Well, pruning, despite its marvelous good purpose, is not really the good news. Getting detached from the vine (and withering) is not the good news either. But having felt the truth and the reality and the necessity of the vine, then the reality of the promise comes in full strength also: “*He who dwells in me, as I dwell in him, bears much fruit... Ask what you will, and you shall have it.*”

That’s good news! I love that promise. Do you? Looking back, it seems to me that most of my problems and difficulties have been

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the result of my *wanting* to bear fruit. Not that such desires were wise or well-executed, but I wanted to do something right someday; accomplish something of value before it was over; make a difference for the Kingdom. Is it not the same for you? Only, I keep thinking too much about my own efforts and not enough about His. I keep putting too little trust in His promise.

It is what we get FROM THE VINE that produces the fruit. If I stay on the vine, I don't have to worry about bearing fruit. I don't have to worry about how well I am doing or what is coming of it. And you don't either. We cannot dwell in His love without producing fruit. It is a universal impossibility! If we stay on the vine, the power fills us and the fruit grows, and no power on earth can prevent that!

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Thank You, Lord.