

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on John 15:1-8 on May 3, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

**Series: Words With Friends**  
**Today's Focus: "Remain In Me"**

**"Stay Attached to Jesus!"**

- 1. It's the only way to stay alive**
- 2. It's the only way to accomplish anything**

I know some of you probably can't see it from way up there at the top of the theater, but here is my ticket from the NCAA Men's Basketball National Championship Game this year. At the bottom of these tickets there is a perforated edge under which there's a bar code to get scanned. But the bar code on Brad's ticket who was with us was just barely still attached by the time we were to enter the stadium. I was a little nervous for him what would happen if it came detached. I mean can you imagine driving down to Indianapolis, buying a ticket, getting all excited to be part of something you've been waiting for your whole life...only to be left standing outside while your friends got to go in for the big game without you?

Well today as we begin this new series that we've called *Words With Friends*, Jesus wants to teach us about something similar because he actually says that we're his friends if we trust in him and through him come to know God as our true Heavenly Father. He wants to see us be able to enter into the never-ending celebration that is in heaven one day. He also wants, before that time comes, that we're able to help other people learn about who God is and what he is like. Because as terrible as it would have been to not make into the National Championship game, so much more tragic it would be for any of us to miss out on eternal life with God in heaven. So what God's Word is imploring us today is this: **"Stay Attached to Jesus!"**

First of all because **it's the only way to stay alive**. Our sermon text today comes from John chapter 15 where Jesus says this: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

<sup>5</sup> *"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. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

I don't know if you noticed it, but there's a word here that's repeated 8 times in these 8 verses. Did you catch it? *Remain*. "Remain in me," Jesus says to his friends and to us. In other words, "Stay attached to Jesus!" Because if you get detached, what will happen? Your faith will die. Faith is what attaches you to Jesus. And to have faith in Jesus is simply to trust that when he died on the cross he truly paid for all your sins. It's to have confidence that because he lives you also will live. But you can't deal with sin on your own. You can't stay spiritually alive on your own either. You can't spiritually thrive and be pleasing to God if you cut yourself off from God's Word and sacraments. Your faith will not grow. It will wither and die. There's no way to stay spiritually alive apart from being attached to Jesus by faith. He is the only true source of spiritual life in order to have forgiveness for our sins, to live a life that is pleasing to God, and to receive eternal life one day in heaven.

This week I went along with Ron and Nancy and Lori from our church to Oconomowoc to pick up items for our new church building that we won in an auction. In stark contrast to us building a brand new church building in the coming months, the auction was held in large old church building in Oconomowoc that is slated for complete demolition. Apparently it's going to be turned into a parking lot! Well along with one of the auction lots that we won...this is what was included. Do any of you know what these are? {hold up prop}

They're actual branches from a grapevine! Or I suppose I could say it's what they used to be. Now they're just dry, brittle sticks. They've become detached from whatever vine they once belonged to wherever they used to grow. Actually there were more branches like these that we could've brought home with us except we didn't have any more room in my van or Ron's truck and none of us thought they were really worth anything to us anyway. Basically we asked permission to leave them there in that old church basement with all the other leftover stuff—the things no one wanted because they had minimal or no value. The only reason I brought these back is because I thought they'd make a great sermon illustration!

But isn't that what Jesus is illustrating for us too in this text? <sup>6</sup> *If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.* I'll refrain today from lighting these branches on fire here in the movie theater—although I'm guessing they would go up in flames very quickly and would make excellent kindling. And by the way, I do not like the comparison Jesus makes here with fire any more than you do.

But then again if it makes you and me a bit uncomfortable to hear Jesus' words today, that's actually a good thing. Jesus intentionally uses this analogy of the detached branches that get thrown into the fire. He speaks these words even with his friends who trust in him to strike the fear of hell into our sinful nature which would always rather get us to think, "Come on, you

can't really be expected to try and resist temptation all the time. Just do whatever everybody else is doing. You deserve to give in once in a while." Or, "You've got more important things to do than go to church every week, don't you? You've got places to go, people to see, games to play." Or to get us to think, "Why listen to that pastor who says you should go to Bible study so that you can take communion regularly?" Or, "What is he talking about when he says that you should start reading the Bible? I mean there he goes again with the importance of God's Word, the importance of God's Word, the importance of God's Word. Can't he appreciate how busy and important a person you are. And after all how are you supposed to squeeze 10 minutes of Bible time into your busy schedule of checking Twitter twenty times a day and compulsively looking to see who liked your current Facebook status and Instagram photo?"

Now friends, maybe this all strikes a little close to home for you and if so that's ok. Take some time, reflect and repent. But also remember these are words Jesus shared with his friends. Remember who Jesus is and why he shared these words. Jesus says, "I am the true vine. You are the branches."

In other words he's saying, "Remain in me, friends, and I will sustain you. I will transfer to you my vitality, my forgiveness, my energy, my strength. Stay attached to me and your faith will grow. You were attached to me through baptism, made clean by the power of my word. You were once destined for the fire, a lifeless branch. But now connected to me by my Spirit's work, my Father's will is for you to spiritually thrive. Stay attached to me and you will receive through the means of grace in word and sacrament the energy to battle against your sinful nature. You will be given the ability produce good works that are pleasing to God who is now your Heavenly Father too. So no matter what happens in life you can know that God promises to use it for your good, to nurture and prune you in love so that you will bear more fruit. Have no fear of being cast off as a dead branch because that's what happened to me when I died for you on the cross. Have no fear of being cast upon the fire of hell because that's what I suffered for you when I was forsaken by the Father in your place. You can look forward to a life that is truly life because as I live...so you also will you live!" Friends, **stay attached to Jesus. It's the only way to stay spiritually and eternally alive.**

And... **it's also the only way to accomplish anything.** Jesus says this here a couple different ways. <sup>4</sup> *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.* <sup>5</sup> *"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.*

Are any of you looking forward to planting a garden this spring? We are at the Kuerth house. So we'll till the ground. We'll plant seeds. And we'll water. We'll pull weeds. We'll lovingly nurture

and tend our garden like we do every summer. Is it unreasonable then to expect the tomato plants to produce a few ripe, red tomatoes? Is it unfair to expect the bean plants to produce an abundance of green beans? Not at all! In the same way God the Father expects that those who have faith in Jesus, who are attached to the Vine and who draw from it vitality and life, will produce fruit. You might call it the fruits of faith. This is actually my favorite way that God describes what God expects in the life of a Christian—good works / fruits of faith. Because think about it. Why does a grapevine produce grapes? Just because that's what it does, right? That's what it was made to do, not because it has to or else. And it's not like going out and yelling at the grapevine will get it to produce grapes any more than scolding your rose bush will get it to make prettier roses. If it's a living branch on the vine, it will produce grapes. If it's a living branch on a rose bush, it will produce roses spontaneously and beautifully because it's in its nature to do so and all the more so if it has been lovingly tended and carefully pruned!

Now there's more that could be said here about how God is the expert gardener who prunes us so that we would produce more fruits of faith. Many of you I'm sure have stories from your lives that would illustrate this. Here's one from mine. You see verse 5 in this text is a very meaningful verse to me. It was chosen by my pastor growing up to be my confirmation verse. So in a way this verse is what you might call my life verse. It's something I've spent a lot of time thinking about and applying to my life in many different situations. Let me read that verse again: <sup>5</sup> *"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."*

So here's why this has been so significant to me. When I was in high school, actually when I was a senior about to graduate, I didn't know what I wanted to do in life. I was actually quite tormented trying to figure it out. On the one hand I had a scholarship offer to consider. So I had the option of attending UW Madison or another WI school to pursue a career in sports medicine which is something I thought I might like to do. So I thought long and hard about that. I thought, "If I went to Madison and got that sports medicine degree then I could make a lot of money. I could maybe buy a nice, big home. I could drive a sports car. I could provide all sorts of amazing opportunities for the kids that I would have one day. And I myself could perhaps work for the Packers and receive accolades for helping out some famous athletes and maybe even become their personal friend. And I wouldn't necessarily have to be a Christian to accomplish any of these things." That was potentially an alternate life course at a time when I was struggling with both my future and my faith.

But then there was this little Bible verse where no matter how many times I thought of it, Jesus kept on saying the same thing, "Ben, remember that apart from me you can do nothing." *If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.* And I thought a lot of about that. "What do you mean, Nothing!? How can you call what I'm going to

accomplish, Nothing!? I'll show you. I'm going to make a lot of money. I'm going to become important. I'm going to get a title—PhD. That's something!"

Except I came to realize, not all at once but over time, that all those things of which the world says, "Ben, this is everything! Don't you see? Money, leisure, popularity, fame, awards...these things are everything"...I realized that if it's apart from faith in Jesus Christ, none of those things really amounts to anything. Nothing in the eyes of God is truly truly good if it doesn't flow out of a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

In hindsight now I know that I could've gone on to do something with my life other than be a pastor and I could live a life pleasing to God. I mean that's the incredible thing about being attached to Jesus. All of a sudden everything we do becomes an opportunity to glorify God and display fruits of our faith. Everything has significance, not just preaching sermons. You can just be a Christian out there in the world living out your faith in whatever vocations you have. It's just that for me the temptation in not going on to be a pastor was to do something else selfishly and apart from Christ.

Because finally here's my point. There are many things the world looks at and says, "This is everything" that God looks at and says, "This is nothing." On the flipside there are many lowly things that the world despises and scorns and calls Nothing...which God highly esteems and calls Everything. Things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Inner attitudes that cannot help but display themselves in what we say and how we treat other people. Things like a deep appreciation for God's Word and sacraments that strengthen us and bring us God's forgiveness which we constantly need. So friends, Stay Attached to Jesus! It's the only way to stay alive. It's also only way to accomplish anything God pleasing and good. Amen.

### **My Next Steps**

**Thought to Ponder:** Living branches stay alive because they're attached to Christ through faith. Can you see why it's so vitally important not to detach yourself from going to church or Bible study to hear God's Word in order to do other things that seem more urgent?

**Treasure to Share:** *"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"* (John 15:5).

**Action to Take:** How has God been pruning you that you might bear more fruit—in your relationships with others who are perhaps hard to get along with or in your attitudes towards circumstances that you can't change? Read Galatians 5:22-26 and ask God to help nurture the "fruit of the Spirit" in your life to his glory.