



Liturgical Day: The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Date: May 10, 2009

Title: Mothers and Vines – Two Sources of Life

Christ is Risen! Christ is risen, indeed!
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Happy Mothers' Day to all the moms in the congregation this morning. In our prayers, we ask that God will bless you for all the ministry you do in your families. As I think of Mother's Day, I am mindful of how many of us first learned the faith at our mother's knee. So this Mother's Day, I want to say *Thank You* to all the mothers here this morning who have worked to share their faith with their families. You have planted seeds, many of which may not blossom for years to come. But as you continue to care for your children, and hold them in your daily prayers, those seeds will eventually sprout and grow. Never lose sight of that, even in the most frustrating of years. And continue your faithful work, knowing that in God's good time, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that gift of faith can be shared with those you love the most. Happy Mothers' Day to you all.

It is a blessing to be together on this Mother's Day, but I have to tell you: I never know what to make of Mothers' Day, as a worship planner. We are in the middle of the Easter season – a time when we more intentionally draw our attention to the proclamation of the resurrection. The focus of most of our lessons are the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples, where he lets them in on what lays ahead for the church. We are a liturgical church, of course, and so we are much more accustomed to shaping our messages around the texts appointed for the day, not the cultural calendar. It was always hard for me to figure out just how to honor Mother's Day without departing from the message of the Easter season.

But when Mothers' Day comes on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, it makes so much more sense to me, because when Mom is at her best, it looks a lot like what Jesus is describing in today's Gospel lesson.

The setting is Holy Week. Jesus and the disciples are together at the table. Jesus washes their feet. He predicts that one of them will betray him, and one of them will deny him. He teaches them what they will have to do once he is gone. And then he gives them this image: he says, "I 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." (15:5)

Jesus knew what the disciples could never have imagined. St. John makes it clear that he knew how his own life would end: on the Cross at Calvary. He knew that his disciples would have a hard time of it – he may have even known that almost all of them would end up dying for the faith. He knew that the ministry he was entrusting to them was far more than they could handle on their own.

He also knew that he would never be far from them. He knew that if they were able to stay connected to him, they would receive from that connection a strength and an ability that would allow them to accomplish far more than they ever could have done on their own. As a vine has no hope apart from the branch that fed it, so too the disciples would have no hope apart from their relationship with Jesus. But as a vine is able to draw life and strength and health from its branch, so too these disciples would learn how those gifts could be theirs, if they remained connected with Jesus and his word.

The most effective moms I've known seem to have the capacity to do just that.

They stay involved in their children's lives. They stay connected with their children's friends. They continue nurturing their children's faith in an active

FIRST LESSON

ACTS 8:26-40

PSALM

PSALM 22:25-31

SECOND LESSON

1ST JOHN 4:7-21

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 15:1-8

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD, YOU GIVE US
YOUR SON AS THE VINE
APART FROM WHOM WE
CANNOT LIVE. NOURISH
OUR LIFE IN HIS
RESURRECTION, THAT WE
MAY BEAR THE FRUIT OF
LOVE AND KNOW THE
FULLNESS OF YOUR JOY,
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST,
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS
WITH YOU AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW
AND FOREVER. AMEN.

9300 E. BELLEVUE AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

VOICE

(303) 770-9300

FAX

(303) 770-9301

WEB

WWW.STPLC.ORG



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way. They hold their children in prayer every day. This kind of love and attention helps to create a bond that is able to keep a family connected, giving each family member a greater store of strength and hope. And in many instances, it is just that connection that has been a life-saver for members of the family.

A Pastor I know claims to love commercials. In a newsletter article a couple of years ago, he wrote about his love for commercials. I'd like to read his words for you. He wrote:

I love commercials. I watch the Super Bowl for the commercials. I watch TV for the commercials. I read magazines for the ads. I love commercials.

And the more I love a product, the more invested I get in the product's commercials. Take Prego pasta sauce. I love pasta. And I love Prego pasta sauce.

Prego's popular tug-at-your-heartstrings TV commercial went through three different incarnations. Prego pasta sauce once started a commercial series with a sentimental, sepia-colored, sweet invitation for its customers to "bring something nice to the table . . . your family." Freeze-frame photos of beautiful children followed.

The second phase of this ad got a bit more real, but it was still very cute. The photos now changed to a home video of a toddler perched in his high chair happily slurping pasta, then dumping the whole bowl on his head. Real – and adorable.

The third commercial variation continues to invite customers to bring your family to the table – but now the family scene is a free-for-all. Brothers, sisters, mom, dad, grandparents, aunts and uncles, are all gathered around a long table, shouting for bread, salad, pastas, pass this, pass that, food flies through the air and – some of it – onto plates. It's chaotic and crazy and completely believable. It's the way big family meals really look!

Throughout all these different family images, whether saccharine-sweet or disorderly real, the theme remained the same: the family together at table, sharing what families always try to share, love for each other, and the connection between them that gives them life.

Family love doesn't always look pretty and perfect. Sometimes it's sloppy and messy. Sometimes it's loud and obnoxious. Sometimes family love sounds more like scolding than sentiment. Sometimes family love feels tough instead of tender.

The thing that keeps all families together isn't the right pasta sauce, or lavish Sunday dinners or even complete acceptance and understanding of all that family members say or do. What keeps families together – what keeps everyone coming back to the table week after week, year after year – is love. The love that stands: stands up, stands by, stands firm, stands out – no matter what. Love is what makes and keeps a family, a family.ⁱ

How often we find that a mother's influence is what is able to keep the gift of love and connectedness at the very heart of the family. That is a significant piece of what we celebrate today.

As it is with the family, so it is with the Christian community. It is ultimately our connection with Christ, and the presence of the Spirit that makes us what we are. I've been thinking about this as I've reflected on the fund raiser we held for Selian Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania just yesterday. Our organizers tell me that we had more than 100 people registered to walk, and that we raised over \$6,000 to support the ministries of this hospital. That's a pretty amazing figure, if you think about it. And I'm excited to be part of the group that will hand deliver that amount to Dr. Jacobson and our friends at Selian in June.

But it's significant that you won't hear the team members who coordinated this effort beating their chests and bragging about what they accomplished. They know that their work set the scene for this generosity to take place. But the generosity came from contributors' connections with Christ, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

As we think about the future we share here at Saint Peter, it is so important to keep that in mind. What is most essential for the health of our congregation, is for each of us to stay connected to Christ; through habits of discipleship; through a prayerful attitude towards life; through seeking to please God in all that we say and do; through letting our faith be not just a Sunday-morning-phenomenon, but a day-by-day reality. In this way we nurture the life-giving connection we have with Christ which allows us to be the people God has

called us to be.

It is essential that we stay connected with Christ. Without him, there is nothing that we can do. With him, there is nothing that is impossible. This morning we consider his words, and the image of how so many Mothers have touched and strengthened their families. May this help us as we consider what it means to be strong in Christ, as individuals and as a congregation.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (May 10, 2009)

Text: ⁱⁱ

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide 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. ⁵ I 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. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

Ἐγὼ εἶμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργὸς ἐστίν. πᾶν κλήμα ἐν ἐμοὶ μὴ φέρον καρπὸν αἶρει αὐτό, καὶ πᾶν τὸ καρπὸν φέρον καθαίρει αὐτὸ ἵνα καρπὸν πλείονα φέρῃ. ἤδη ὑμεῖς καθαροὶ ἐστε διὰ τὸν λόγον ὃν λελάληκα ὑμῖν· μέναιτε ἐν ἐμοί, καγὼ ἐν ὑμῖν. καθὼς τὸ κλήμα οὐ δύναται καρπὸν φέρειν ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ ἐὰν μὴ μένῃ ἐν τῇ ἀμπέλῳ, οὕτως οὐδὲ ὑμεῖς ἐὰν μὴ ἐν ἐμοὶ μένητε. ἐγὼ εἶμι ἡ ἄμπελος, ὑμεῖς τὰ κλήματα. ὁ μένων ἐν ἐμοὶ καγὼ ἐν αὐτῷ οὗτος φέρει καρπὸν πολὺν, ὅτι χωρὶς ἐμοῦ οὐ δύνασθε ποιεῖν οὐδέν. ἐὰν μὴ τις μένῃ ἐν ἐμοί, ἐβλήθη ἔξω ὡς τὸ κλήμα καὶ ἐξηράνθη καὶ συναγούσιν αὐτὰ καὶ εἰς τὸ πῦρ βάλλουσιν καὶ καίεται. ἐὰν μένητε ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ τὰ ῥήματα μου ἐν ὑμῖν μένῃ, ὃ ἐὰν θέλητε αἰτήσασθε, καὶ γενήσεται ὑμῖν. ἐν τούτῳ ἔδοξάσθη ὁ πατήρ μου, ἵνα καρπὸν πολὺν φέρητε καὶ γένησθε ἐμοὶ μαθηταί. ^{iv}

ⁱ From Homiletics Online, based on a sermon by Len Sweet: "Go Mediate!" (For May 9, 2004 – the 5th Sunday of Easter.

ⁱⁱ Link to: <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/> for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 15:1-8, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. John 15:1-8, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).