

Easter 5 – May 2, 2021
Text: John 15:1-8
Theme: Look at All the Deadfall

In 1980 Mt. St. Helens, in Washington state, blew off about 1300 feet of mountain top when the previously dormant volcano erupted. That particular type of volcano spews hot gasses more than lava and the gasses from Mt. St. Helens were over 1500 degrees. Trees, buildings and people were instantly vaporized but as the 1300 feet of rock came crashing down into Spirit Lake, a huge flood was created down the Toutle and Cowlitz Rivers that washed over and uprooted hundred-foot evergreens and deposited them all over the valley. There were huge deadfalls everywhere, some of them 50 ft. high, and the whole area looked like a nuclear wasteland. As I stood along the river in the early summer of 1980 and beheld this sight, I was amazed at what the power of nature could do. Miles of once heavily forested lands had become a plain of broken and burned waste.

I think of this scene when Jesus talks about being cut off from the vine. "If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." That's what I see when I look into the world around us. There are piles of people who are disconnected from the vine and slowly becoming useless piles of deadfall.

Some churches love to keep their roles clear of members who are not active. Every year they comb through the membership rolls and remove people who have not actively participated in some way in whatever given amount of time they have decided upon. They call these people "delinquent members." I have spent my ministry fighting against that particular moniker. As I have said so many times to you, this place is not a business or a club. It is a family. If I failed to pay my dues at Glass Courts, I would be delinquent. If I failed to pay my property taxes to the Village of Lombard, I would be delinquent. But I cannot be delinquent from my family. I might be uninvolved, or disconnected, or angry, but, by definition, I cannot be delinquent from a group of people with whom I have been spiritually connected through Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As members of the Board of Lay Ministry can tell you, I do not allow the word delinquent to be used in reference to members of this family.

Having said that, we do have a number of folks who are disconnected from or uninvolved with the family. Any person who is disconnected from the vine is slowly withering. What are we going to do about it? First, know this. Neither you nor I have the power to fix them. We can shame them for their poor choices and guilt them into attending worship now and then, but that does not reconnect them to the vine. In fact, shaming and guiltning further cuts them

off, pushing them further from the source to which they need to be connected. Those of us who are firmly connected to Christ and thrive on his Word, his body, his blood and are washed constantly in our baptismal waters want that our disconnected folks to be connected as well, but how do we facilitate that happening?

Look to Deacon Philip in our reading from the book of Acts. A eunuch was a man who was castrated. Now you may think this a horrible thing but in fact, many men chose to have this mutilation performed upon them or even performed it upon themselves because it led to great power and position. This was a very common practice throughout the world. Eunuchs could be trusted with queens and harems. Being a eunuch was seen as a mark of devotion to one's benefactor, a sign of having given up family in order to serve. This is completely inconsistent with God's plan. He created the family unit: husband, wife and children, and that unit was the center of His whole created system. Philip could have started with showing the eunuch the error of his ways. He had placed worldly gain and personal fulfillment so high that he had mutilated himself for its purpose. But Philip did not even mention that. He proclaimed the good news that Jesus Christ had died on the cross for him, to pay for his sins.

It is true that the Law of God must be upheld. We cannot ignore the sinful acts and attitudes that infiltrate every aspect of our lives. Our disconnected people are caught in that web of sin every bit as much as we are. They are fed lies daily from a corrupt world. Television, movies and social media teach that it is okay to live together and commit serial adultery instead of being married. People with advanced degrees proclaim that it is fine to reject the gifts of gender and biology which God gave you, and decide for yourself how you will express your sexuality, what gender you would like to be or even what biological parts you have. You had no say about the way you were made, so just enjoy any lifestyle you like and ignore what God says. We see "thou shalt not steal" violated even more than "thou shalt not commit adultery." Money and power are what get you ahead in this life so you better put everything second to the pursuit of those and the end justifies the means. For those in school, grades are the currency of power and the measure of your worth, and getting into a good college is the entryway to a good life. All of these are lies told to us by the dark prince that infiltrates this world, and so many people go bobbing along after him like pigeons chasing bread crumbs.

The difference is that *you are* connected to the vine and so the truth and power of the Gospel flow into you and drown those lies in

baptismal water. *You are* connected to the vine so the power of Jesus' body and blood gives you the strength to resist the world's allure and Satan's temptations. *You are* educated in worship and Bible study so you can spot the lies Satan tells and the diversions from God's path that he lays before us. Those who are disconnected from the vine cannot do any of this. They are picked off one by one by Satan and his demons. But thanks be to God that he has put *you* in their lives. He has placed *you* as their fathers or mothers, brothers or sisters, aunts or uncles, cousins and friends to love them as Philip loved the eunuch. You are not called to judge but to love. You will have to overlook their arrogance or misinformation and love them anyway just as God loved you. You will have to forgive their devotion to the gods of this world just as Jesus forgave you. You will have to be as patient with them as God is with you.

After 15 years, my Philodendron died. I don't know why, maybe it just ran its course. At any rate, I took a cutting from my other Philodendron and stuck it in water to root it. At first it withered and looked as though it would surely dry up and die as well. But I've been patient with it and made sure it got plenty of sun and water and it has greened up and I noticed a tiny bud of new growth. It is starting to grow roots! I will feed and water it with the materials God provided. I will care for it and be patient with it. I

do not demand that it become a full and beautiful plant overnight. And it will grow and flourish. God has promised that we too will grow and flourish when we are fed with his Word and Sacraments. When the body and blood of Christ, who died on the cross to pay for our sins, flows into us at Holy Communion we are just like a plant, drawing nutrients from the soil in which we are planted. When the Word enters your ears through the readings, the hymns, the liturgy and hearing the sermon, it is like the sun shining on the leaves of a plant, and the Word of God changes us and strengthens us. This is what God has promised will happen for everyone who is connected to Him, the one true vine. Believe it. He keeps His promises.