

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – April 29, 2018
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

When I began working in an office setting – yes, I know, back in the dark ages, all we had on our desks were stacks of paper and a telephone – a landline, if you can remember back that far. Of course, we’ve had desktop computers for some time now. Eventually, we moved to portable laptops. And these days you can accomplish almost any task with just an iPad or a smart phone. It is paper that has become obsolete. No one, it seems, writes anything down anymore. Everything we need to know is stored in our electronic devices – which is OK, up to a point. That point is reached when you are in the middle of a download or an upload and you see that little battery sign flashing in the corner. Yes, those electronic devices are only as good as the amount of power stored in their battery. You can travel around the globe and stay connected – but only if you remember to recharge your device every few hours. We can go anywhere – as long as we stay reasonably close to an electrical outlet, that is.

In the world of first century Palestine, they didn’t have iPhones or iPads or other such gadgets. They didn’t even have electrical outlets. But they understood what it meant to be connected. The example Jesus used in our gospel passage today was of a vine, a grape vine, one presumes. A branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains connected to the vine just as all of those electronics are no more than paperweights unless we’ve taken the time to recharge their batteries, unless we continually reconnect them to the source of power. The vine, the source of power in our gospel today is Jesus Christ. Every branch that does not bear fruit is removed, and every branch that does bear fruit is pruned so that it may bear even more fruit. Even as far removed as we are from agriculture, we understand the image. We’ve trimmed enough houseplants to know that when you cut off a portion it dies in a few hours or a few days. A portion of a houseplant, the branch of a vine cannot survive unless it is attached to a source of nutrients and water. We understand that as a fact of nature – but that doesn’t mean that we are willing to accept that same concept when it comes to faith. Oh, we may see the value in being “spiritual” – even in bearing fruit – but we don’t necessarily see the point in being connected, in being attached to the vine. I can be “spiritual” even if I am not religious we are told over and over in the media. Of course, that’s another way of saying – I want all the “feel-good” aspects of a deep spiritual life without it impacting my behavior in any way. I want to be able to cheat on my taxes or look down on others or have casual sex or tell lies or gossip or do anything else I feel like doing without anyone telling me I am wrong. I don’t want to be connected to

any organized Church if they are going to tell me that my behavior is sinful. I'll just stay over here – unconnected, separated from the vine.

The trouble with that, of course, is that Jesus tells us that unless we remain on the vine, we cannot bear fruit. Unless we remain in Jesus, we can do nothing. Nothing. Not that we'll produce a little less fruit, not that we'll accomplish slightly less than we might otherwise. Jesus is very clear. Stay connected to the living God, stay connected to the vine and you will bear fruit. Separate yourself from the vine, from Jesus himself and you can do nothing. We are either a living, life-giving branch or we are a branch broken and withered and ready to be burned. And the trouble, of course, with staying connected to the vine is not the vine itself. Most of us are only too happy to stay at least somewhat connected to Jesus. The trouble with staying connected to the vine is that we must be also connected to all these other branches. Look around. Some of these branches need work. I may not be the best branch on the vine, I tell myself. I may not have the most fruit or the brightest leaves or the healthiest stalk – but I'm a better branch than some of these others – why should I hang around with them?

That's the difficulty with Christianity, isn't it? Jesus came to save me. He came to offer me eternal life – but he didn't *just* come here to save me alone. He came to offer salvation to all of us – to each and every disciple who remains connected to Christ – the ones we like and admire and the ones we think are dragging us down. You see, we don't get to make the judgments. Jesus tells us that it is the Father who is the vine grower. He's the one who does the pruning. As much as you and I may want to get out our shears and do a little trimming – that's not our job. And, you see, when we lowly little branches try to do the pruning – we usually end up cutting ourselves off from the vine – severing our connection with Christ through sin. Our job is simply to be the best branch possible – to strengthen our connection to the vine each and every day. And there is no better place than here – at the table of the Lord, nourished in word and in sacrament. We need the sustenance we receive here, just as our electronic devices depend upon that daily connection to the source of electricity. Unless we remain in Jesus, we can do nothing. But if we remain connected to Christ, all things are possible.