

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Once a month for our Wednesday morning chapel service for our school here, we watch a video put out by our Synod called, “Kids Connection.” The video features teenaged hosts and is written specifically for children to share stories of how other kids are learning about God and serving him. There’s always a brief message at the end by Pastor Tony Schultz. But the overall purpose can actually be easily understood in a phrase you hear over and over in each video: “Stay connected to Jesus!” What better vision could they have? What’s more important.

Here at Good Shepherd we have a similar vision. Our vision is “Connecting you to Christ.” *Repeat.* That is the benchmark and the test of every activity here at Good Shepherd. In some way, everything we do is to help connect people to Christ.

You could say our 7-8th grade confirmation class has the exact same purpose and goal. While it does serve as the membership class children, membership is not the purpose or goal of the class. While after being confirmed, these teens will be welcome to receive the Lord’s Supper, preparation for the Lord’s Supper is not the purpose or the goal of the class. The purpose and goal is simply this: To connect them to Christ. And as their confirmation classes are now ending and they confirm the faith they were baptized into, my biggest prayer and goal for each and every one of them is this: To stay connected to Jesus.

So let’s talk about that. Why is it so vitally important that they have and maintain a connection to Jesus Christ? Why is it so vitally important of you to have and maintain a connection to Jesus Christ? Jesus himself makes it perfectly clear in John 15:1-8

John 15:1-8 (NIV)

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He 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. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will 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. ⁵“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Jesus starts out by saying, **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.”** And a few verses later, **“I am the vine; you are the branches.”** The picture Jesus uses is a familiar one. Jesus is the life-giving vine. God the Father is the gardener who cares for the vineyard. We who are believers are the branches coming out from Jesus -- branches which either bear fruit, or not. In illustrating the importance of being connected to him, Jesus uses this vivid metaphor.

Why is it so important to remain in Jesus? Jesus is the life giving vine apart from whom we are spiritually dead. I’m sure all of you have done some yard work. What happens to branches

when you trim a tree? The branches wither and they die. They've been cut off from their life-source. They can't survive on their own. And that's what happens to us when we are cut off from Jesus. We wither and we die. Jesus said, **"If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."**

You see God created man to be connected to him. And ever since the fall into sin, Jesus is the only true life-giving vine. We Americans love liberty, freedom, independence. But the truth is, God made us so that we would have life and happiness only when we are connected to him and dependent on him. God is the source of life and every blessing. Connected to him, then, we have life and every blessing. Yet our sinful nature wants nothing of this dependence. It declares independence from God. Independence from God is a branch severed from the tree... a branch cut from the vine.

Or, sometimes our sinful nature attaches itself to a false vine. Maybe we do recognize that we can't make it on our own. And so we try to draw meaning and purpose for life from something other than the true God... from something other than Jesus Christ. [So listen confirmands. Be aware now of the pitfalls and temptations. There are people sitting here right now who are trying to draw life from the wrong thing. And you will be tempted to do the same. We attach ourselves to **money**, and we think from it we will draw meaning and purpose. We attach ourselves to our **career**, thinking it gives us our identity and purpose. We attach ourselves to **family**. But wait, isn't that a good thing? Certainly your family is a tremendous blessing from God. God wants us to love our family, and understand the importance of family. But is your sole purpose and identity in life derived from family? No it's not. We attach ourselves hobby or leisure, thinking our source of meaning and fun can be found there.

How does God feel when we detach ourselves from him? How does he feel when we attach ourselves to things other than him? It makes him both sad and angry. Sad that we don't want to be with him. Angry that we disobey him and live as rebels. We don't do what he wants... and we can't please him with our lives. So what does he do? Cast us out? No, he came up with a rescue plan to graft us back in and adopt us back into his family.

God in his love can't bear to see dead branches lying around, and so he made a way to graft them back on. God sent his Son Jesus to set things right. Sin caused the severance. It had to be removed. Get rid of the sin and God and man could become friends again. The connection can be restored. So Jesus, true God and true man, in the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, did everything necessary to graft us back to the source of life. He lived a perfect life, and then he took on himself every last sin and rebellion of all of mankind. And then he proceeded to pay the penalty which was owed for that sin. He suffered (he suffered hell) and he died. He was completely cut off from the Father... complete severance from the Father because of your sins and mine. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" he cried.

God the Father looked at the price his Son paid for mankind's sin, and he determined that Jesus' payment was complete. Sin was atoned for. By God's grace, through Jesus, your sins are forgiven. Your declaration of independence that should have meant your eternal death is paid for through Christ and you are brought back in to a dependent relationship on your Creator and Redeemer... just as God intended. Your sin of attaching yourself to things and people instead of God. That's forgiven too through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. And to prove it, our heavenly Father raised his Son back to life, to rule again with him, and to be our perfect mediator between us

and God.

And that's why Jesus stresses the importance of remaining in him for eternal life. He is our only connection! If you are apart from him, you are still in a hostile state with the almighty God, cut off from him. You've got no connection with God, and you will not go to heaven. In Christ, though, we are heaven-bound.

And how are we connected to Christ? Simply, through faith. And faith is simply taking God at his word. It's believing his promise that Jesus is the way to heaven. Through faith in Jesus and his work -- in other words, connected to Jesus, the life giving vine -- we do have eternal life in heaven.

Now how can we *maintain* this vitally important connection? Jesus said to his disciples, "**You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.**" Quite simply the connection to Jesus is produced and maintained through the Word of God. The apostle Paul wrote in Rom 10:17: "**Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.**" When we hear and study the word, the Holy Spirit can work and maintain faith in our hearts. On the other side, if you want a sure fire way to loosen or break your connection with Christ, stop studying the word. I think we'd all have to admit there have been times in our lives when we've felt a little detached from Jesus. Our faith was weak and we just weren't close to our Savior. Take a moment and think back in your life to such a time. Or maybe that time is now. Maybe you feel distant from your Savior right now. Maybe you feel like there is a loose connection. Now I want to ask you this question. How much time were you or are you spending in the word? How much time do you spend studying your Bible and applying it to your life? How regularly do you come to church, and Sunday School and Bible Class to hear God's Word and be built up by His people? Most of the time if you're feeling distant from your Savior, it's because you've also been distant from the Word. Jesus is our connection for eternal life. And the Word of God is the means the Holy Spirit uses to keep that connection strong.

Now, not only does our connection to Jesus ensure eternal life with God. But our connection to Jesus allows us to really live in this life, also. Jesus tells us that when we remain in him, we will be productive. We will bear fruit. Jesus says, "**If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.**" Note what happens to the person who remains in Jesus: "**He will bear much fruit.**" Note that Jesus doesn't say, "he will bear a little fruit, or he will at certain times bear fruit" but "he will bear much fruit." Now certainly the most important thing we receive through our connection to Christ is eternal life, but we also receive a new life now! The natural result of your living and intimate connection to Jesus is that you will bear much fruit -- you will naturally produce God pleasing attitudes and lifestyles and good works.

And what types of fruits can you expect from your connection to Jesus? The apostle Paul gives us a sample listing in Galatians 5:22-23. And as I read these be asking yourself if you've seen some of these fruits in your life: "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**" These are all very general things which will show themselves in specific actions. Maybe by nature you're not very patient. Have you seen patience developing along with your connection to Jesus? Maybe you were never a very kind person. Have you seen yourself become kinder as you've known your Savior better? Those fruits of the Spirit become more and more evident as your faith and trust in Jesus grow.

God himself helps us become more and more fruitful. Jesus said, "**Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.**" The heavenly Father, that divine

vineyard keeper, isn't content to see us produce a little bit of fruit. And he doesn't want to see you produce fruit and then stop. It's his will to see us continue to produce more and more fruits of faith. And to keep us producing he prunes us. Sometimes to keep a fruit tree productive, you have to trim back the branches-- you have to do some cutting. We also need pruning. And we're pruned the same way we are connected to Christ -- through the Word of God. As you read the word, you'll learn certain things from it that prune you and makes you more fruitful. For example, you may learn from the Bible that not only is murder sinful, but so is just being angry. Then you realize, "Wait, I get angry all the time. I didn't realize that was against God's will. I want to serve him better, so out of love for Christ I will try to stop getting angry. Or maybe you have a problem with greed or lust or complaining, or gossiping ... whatever weakness you have in your life. The more you hear and learn and study God's word the more it prunes you and shapes you. It trims you. It makes you even more fruitful. And the result is that you live more and more in line with the will of the God who loved us enough to give heaven to us as a free gift.

Trials and difficulties in life tend to do the same thing. As you realize your own shortcomings and faults and weaknesses, you must turn to the Lord more and more. This pruning process often isn't pleasant at the time, but your faith in Christ increases, your connection to Christ grows stronger, and soon you are bearing even more fruit in your life. In lots of ways, our loving Father looks to increase our trust in him, and make us even more fruitful branches in his kingdom.

Why produce fruit? Why not just live our lives connected to Jesus, but living how we please? Friends, when we know the death and separation sin brings, and when know the life and the fellowship with God that Jesus brings, sin and rebellion becomes the last thing on your mind. Living for self goes out the window, and living for God become priority one. Having fruits of faith gives glory to our heavenly Father. Jesus said, **"This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."** We glorify God when we bear much fruit. And when others see that fruit, they also give praise and glory to God. It's all about God. It's all about the salvation won for us by Christ Jesus. You believe this, don't you! Now live it your daily lives as you bear much fruit to the glory of the Father.

Thank God today for the special connection he gave us with him through the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank God especially for the connection he's made with all those being confirmed. He is the vine we are the branches. Remain firmly in Christ. Connected to him for eternal life! Connected to him to live a fruitful and productive life right now! Or to put it all very simple: Stay connected to Jesus! Amen.