

## Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

April 28, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 9:26-31 (The Church throughout Palestine was at peace.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 22 (I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.)*

*Second Reading: 1 John 3:18-24 (Let us love not in word or speech, but in deed and truth.)*

*Gospel: John 15:1-8 (The vine and the branches.)*

The vine and the branches is one of those classic biblical metaphors that we all know and love. It was not entirely original to Jesus, though. He took a traditional image for the Chosen People, commonly used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and put a new twist on it. The people of Israel had long been accustomed to thinking of themselves as the “vineyard of the Lord,” lovingly planted by God in the Promised Land after their Exodus from Egypt. When the Prophets spoke of this vineyard, it was usually to reprove the people for their infidelities. In their estimation, God had done everything in his power to make the vineyard fruitful, but the people had failed to live up to their potential, because they had turned away from their covenant with the Lord. In Jesus’ Parable of the Tenant Farmers, he puts the blame not on the people themselves, but on Israel’s religious leaders. He suggests that the people are fully capable of producing the kinds of righteous deeds that will glorify God, if only their teachers would do a better job of leading them. In this passage, though, Jesus looks at the vineyard analogy from a whole different perspective. He describes himself as the *vine* at the heart of the vineyard, and he speaks about the productivity of the vineyard as a function of the *spiritual health of individual branches*. Each one that remains firmly connected to *him* and well pruned by *God’s word* will flourish and produce much fruit. Others will produce less fruit, or even wither and die.

The “vineyard of the Lord” had always been a *collective* metaphor, representing the special relationship between God and the *nation of Israel*. Jesus transforms it into a *personal* metaphor, representing the special relationship between himself and every person who bears the name of “Christian.” Hence, this vineyard can include not just the Jewish people, but also Gentiles who have come to believe in Jesus. It includes all of us, in every generation, who belong to Christ and seek to live in communion with him.

As Jesus suggests, each individual branch in this vineyard is *capable* of producing a healthy cluster of grapes, thus contributing to a bountiful harvest. All of us who have been baptized into Christ have life because of him. His Holy Spirit dwells within us, granting us the power to do the works of God. However, we don’t always live up to that potential. Many of us are not producing as abundantly as we could. We might be putting out plenty of leaves, but not enough grapes. Some people are struggling even worse. They seem to be withering and dying on the vine. What can we do to turn that around and be more productive disciples? Well, Jesus offers us two answers.

The first is to stay firmly connected to him, the source of all our strength and vitality. Everyone who knows anything about growing grapes understands that the vine provides all the

nutrients to the branches. Any branch that becomes detached from the vine will be cut off from its only source of nourishment and life. Jesus says, “Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.” So, he’s reminding us that we depend on him as completely as the branches of a vineyard depend on the vine. If we try to go our own way, separating ourselves from Christ, choosing another way of life contrary to the Gospel, we will surely wither and die spiritually. We will quickly discover just how powerless we are without Christ.

This may seem like a self-evident truth, both for the branches of a vineyard and for followers of Christ. However, as a vineyard continues to grow more lush and fruitful, the vine itself becomes more hidden from view. The source of all that life gets obscured by the very fruit that it’s producing. Just so, we Christians can become so enamored of our gifts and talents and so proud of all the success that we have achieved that we can easily forget the One who blesses us with all those gifts and inspires us to use them to build the Kingdom of God. All of us tend to pray rather fervently when times are tough and we recognize our need for God’s help. But we may not seek the Lord quite as fervently when everything seems under control, when our efforts seem to be *fruitful*. Jesus’ analogy of the vine and the branches reminds us to keep turning back to the Lord to seek his continued strength and support, *even when times are good*.

The second point that Jesus makes is about our need to be “pruned” spiritually by God. He says that the Father prunes his vineyard very carefully, removing every branch that does not bear fruit, and cutting back the rest of them, so that they can bear *more fruit*. As any vinegrower knows, the reason for pruning is to ensure that there is no extraneous wood to soak up vital resources. He wants all the life-giving nutrients to flow into the *grapes* and the branches that support them, not into branches that produce nothing but leaves.

Jesus says that the *word* that he speaks to his disciples is what prunes us. His teachings challenge us to reform our lives, to cut away at our vices and sinful inclinations and anything else that inhibits us from being the best and most productive Christians that we can be. And, as we know, sometimes his words can cut us deeply. When they reveal truths about ourselves that we would rather not see, it can feel as though we’re being pruned back more severely than we would like. We don’t mind *a little* repentance and conversion, but Jesus sometimes demands a more radical change of heart and change of habits. Sometimes, he asks us not just to renounce our *sins*, but also to free ourselves from *attachments* that are not necessarily sinful. We may want to hang onto some of that extra foliage, but Jesus says, “Let it go; make room for more grapes.”

Jesus’ analogy of the vine and the branches is at once comforting and challenging. On the one hand, he reminds us that he will provide all that we need for a holy and productive life, which gives glory to God. On the other hand, he also cautions us not to rely too much on ourselves or to allow ourselves to get loaded down with attachments. So, let us give our Heavenly Father free reign to prune us as he sees fit, and let us always cling to Jesus, our one and only source of life.