

Devotions – May 29 – June 4, 2016

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Sunday, May 29, 2016

Text: (John 15:5 – author’s translation.)

I AM the Vine; you are the branches. The one who abides in me, and I in him or her – this one bears much fruit: for without me, you are not able to produce anything.

The practice of grafting plants began thousands of years ago, and still continues. Grafting is a sort of splicing. There is a rootstock – an actual growing plant. Then there is a scion – essentially a stick. The orchardist attaches the scion to the rootstock. If the splice is done well, and if the scion is not dislodged, the two grow into one another and become a single organism. Otherwise, the rootstock will keep growing, but the scion will shrivel.

Jesus’ metaphor of the Vine and branches is given against the background of this ancient horticultural craft. He is the Rootstock; we are the scions. If we are attached to the Rootstock, we grow and bear fruit. Otherwise we slowly dry up.

What is the scion supposed to do, once it has been attached? Answer: The scion doesn’t “do” anything. Its job is to *stay put*. And yet if it does that, its tissue gradually interweaves with that of the rootstock until it is drawing sap – water, nutrients, *life* – from the rootstock. It becomes united to the stock. It grows and makes leaves and yields fruit. So by “doing nothing” it does wonderful and amazing things.

So as scions grafted into Christ the Rootstock, our first job is to stay put. Yes, the expected and necessary result is that we bear much fruit. But this doesn’t happen on account of scurrying around, looking for a better way to grow; still less, by bemoaning the lack of fruit in the world. It happens organically, as the tissue of our lives interweaves with the Life of Christ.

On this Second Sunday after Pentecost, we enter what has been informally called the “Long Green Season”. The paraments (altar and pulpit hangings) are now green, and will by and large stay that way until Christ the King Sunday (November 20 this year). There is no Christmas or Easter or Pentecost to spice things up. It can seem like nothing is happening, and I know that more than one person has found it dull. But as with the natural world around us during summer, this can be the time when the crucial growth happens. So come – worship, sit under the Word, receive the Sacrament. Stay put there, letting the tissue of your life interweave with Christ’s. In this way, prepare to bear fruit.

Let us pray: *God, you have grafted us to the Rootstock, Jesus Christ. May we bear much fruit in him. Amen.*



Monday, May 30, 2016

Text: *Philippians 4:8 – (composite translation)*

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things.

The term “Memorial Day” contains the word “memory”. On this day, many people remember those no longer with us, especially veterans. There are many good ways to remember, among them:

- Remembering *that they were*. The very fact that they existed as human beings matters.
- Remembering *any ways in which they were a good example*. We need good models to spur us on.
- Remembering *what they valued*. We will not imitate every aspect of another generation’s culture. (No one came to Sunday worship dressed like the people in the 1923 picture on the church basement wall.) But if they valued something, we do well to at least find out *why*. In many cases, it could be tragic to lose it.
- Remembering *those who gave their lives*. This includes, most obviously, those who gave their lives by dying, perhaps to protect others or to serve their country. But can it not also involve those who gave their lives by living? We remember those who lived in a way that benefited us.

Not everything there is to remember about a person is positive. Human beings are, after all, human beings. There is no call for dishonesty about a person’s warts.

Yet there can be an important place for sifting out the good things and looking at them. Lay aside for a time the fact that Uncle Eino was foul-mouthed and too fond of vodka. Remember that he bravely served his country. Take your focus from the wry memory of Mrs. Tahkdalahti’s sharp tongue. Emphasize that she was generous and thoughtful, and raised gorgeous petunias. “What is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy – think about these things.”

As we do this, even on a secular holiday, let us remember that one Human Being never left any bad memories of what he did, namely, our Lord Jesus, who not only was, but will come again; who was “an example for you to follow in his steps” (I Peter 2:21); who knew exactly what to value; who gave his life for our sake. When we think about him, we will always be thinking about what is true, what is honorable, etc.

Let us pray: *Help us, O God, in our remembrances. Help us to live so that the remembrance of us will be sweet. And help us most of all to remember you, for only by your grace can we stand. Amen.*



Tuesday, May 31, 2016

Texts: Luke 1:43; John 1:14a

[Elizabeth exclaimed,] “And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43 ESV) The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory... (John 1:14a ESV)

On our church calendar, May 31 is the festival day traditionally called The Visitation. In the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal, it is called The Visit of Mary to Elizabeth. This has a contemporary ring to it, and is more self-explanatory. But for me the term “Visitation” has a way of reasserting itself – a sign of old age, no doubt. Anyway, the focus of the day is meant to be time when Mary the mother of Jesus visited Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, as narrated in Luke 1:39-56.

As a boy I was introduced to The Visitation, not by church or hymnal, but from an irreverent little book by Ward Kimball called *Art Afterpieces*. This book was filled with important paintings from the world of Art History – except that Kimball had, shall we say, touched them up a little. I can’t remember who had created the original of the painting entitled “The Visitation” – perhaps some Renaissance master. In it, Mary and Elizabeth are shown embracing, framed by a beautiful arch. But in Kimball’s version, soaring across the blue sky in the background is a flying saucer.

Aliens dropping by to see the saintly mothers. “Visitation” indeed!

But for those with eyes to see, what really happened was not one bit less alien and strange. The real Visitation was not of Mary to Elizabeth, nor of the spaceship from Planet X to the Judean hill country. The real Visitation – and the real alien invasion – was of God to earth.

Only I have that backwards. The real alien planet is Earth. In Jesus Christ, Earth’s lawful King was invading to take up his rightful reign. “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to those who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:11-12 ESV).

Let us pray: O God, our rightful Ruler, we have turned this into an alien planet, but you have begun to make all things new. Even now, in my life, may your kingdom come and your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Amen.



Wednesday, June 1, 2016

Text: Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

When I was a Music Education major in college, a couple of my teachers hammered home the dictum: “*There are no tone deaf students! Tone-deafness does not exist!*”

My first job after graduating was at a small Christian school in Minnesota, where I had the privilege of starting a music program. In the beginning, I found very quickly that fully half the students could not hold a tune.

Had my teachers been wrong? On the contrary, they turned out to be spectacularly right. My teachers had said that if students could not sing well, it was not because they were *unable to hear* (“tone deaf”). It was because they *had not yet learned the skill*. So when I set out to see if the students could learn the skill, I found that they could. *All* of them. There remained a wide range in ability, but they all could do it. Human beings were made to sing.

I was fortunate to be able to have students come out of their main classrooms for short lessons, in which I could tailor my teaching to individual needs. There were moments of sudden breakthrough – the thrilling times every teacher lives for, when we see the light dawn on a pupil’s face. Mostly, though, it was a matter of patient, slow work. One hoped that it could also be fun most of the time. (Truth in advertising: Not all my students thought so.) But performance didn’t happen without practice.

In Deuteronomy, God’s people are commanded to hear. In spiritual life as in music, I believe in the dictum: *There are no tone deaf students*. We have all been created capable of loving God. As with singing, not everybody seems to learn this. But I believe everyone can. (Let us be faithful in prayer for those who don’t seem to have begun learning.)

If you are reading this, I suspect you have already gotten over being a spiritual monotone. You wouldn’t take the trouble to go on a devotional website, if you hadn’t already begun to hear and reproduce the beauty of God’s music.

But there may be some who remember past breakthroughs, and wonder why it hasn’t happened in awhile. “I felt so close to God then,” some people say. “Now it seems so hum-drum. What happened?”

There are many possible answers to that question, depending on what’s been going on in your life. But often the best answer is, “Don’t worry about it.” If there is sin, by all means confess it and turn from it. But otherwise, just keep coming. Hear God’s Word. Worship. Pray. God is ready to keep doing the patient, slow work of helping you learn to love better. Human beings were made to love God.

Let us pray: Teach me, O God, the deep sweet music of your love. Help me to hear, and to sing, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.



Thursday, June 2, 2016

Texts:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV)

[Jesus says:] “My sheep listen to my voice.” (John 10:27 NIV) The season of birdsong has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. (Song of Songs 2:12, composite translation)

Birders know how important birdsong can be. For the birds themselves, of course, it has to do with communication: making love, establishing turf, and settling rivalries. For humans, there is of course the delight which many of the songs can bring. But for that peculiar breed of human called a birder, birdsong is also about finding and identifying our avian quarry. I like the way the Asian naturalist Prakash Chand Gotan puts it: “Sometimes you can see a bird just by hearing its sound.”

On the other hand, things can go wrong. I once heard a report on the radio about two British birders. Each was excited about the owl he was hearing near his house. He would do his best owl call, and then it would call back. But afterwards they put the pieces together. Long story short, they had been calling to each other.

Some years ago my wife and I, still inexperienced in birding by ear, were desperately trying to see the mysterious birds that were singing all around our campsite. They seemed invisible, yet they made so much noise! Looking back, I am now fairly certain that our “birds” had been tree frogs.

And more than a few times, I have followed the sound of a mysterious “bird sound” to its source, only to discover it was a squirrel or chipmunk.

So it’s possible to have a “bird” turn out to be a rodent, an amphibian, or even a *Homo sapiens*. One of the first things to do is, learn to identify what *isn’t* a bird.

God’s people are told to “hear”, and thus to love the Lord. Jesus promises that his sheep will listen to his voice. (John 10:4 indicates that his sheep *know* the Shepherd’s voice.) It comes down to recognizing what is and what isn’t of God. Years of coming close to God through the Scriptures, the Sacraments, prayer and worship can help us become confident of God’s voice. Yet even the newest beginner can begin by asking, “Is this the sort of thing that helps me love God with all my being? Does this fit well with loving my neighbor as myself?” Even when we feel confused, we can remember this: The person who has come to Christ in faith, *has* listened to his voice.

Let us pray: Help me, Good Shepherd, to listen to your voice and follow you. Help me to love you with my whole being, and to love my neighbor as myself. Protect me from false shepherds, and carry me in your arms. Amen.

Friday, June 3, 2016



Texts:

***O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD all the earth.***

***Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day. (Psalm 96:1-2 NRSV)
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:3b NRSV)***

I believe it was the great composer Robert Schumann who once said, “In order to compose, all you need to do is remember a tune no one else has thought of.” Schumann himself, of course, “remembered” a lot of such music. But his remark captures well the ironic feeling of creative work. It does feel like trying to remember what doesn’t yet exist.

There is a certain angst involved in creative process. Will it be original? Will it be worth my effort? Will it turn out to be plagiarism? Will anyone even visit this website during the days I’m writing for Prayfaithfully? If they do, will I wish they hadn’t? Will *they* wish they hadn’t?

Even day-to-day life can feel like this. We want to remember what to do, but how do you “remember” something that hasn’t even happened yet? That, of course, is part of the adventure of life. Every day is like a new song, and we are all composing it as we go. We strain to remember the as yet unwritten melody.

So as you live into the new song of this day, live it “to the Lord”. Keep doing this from day to day.

And if you want to find the right paths, remember that God desires this for you, too. There is a powerful comfort in remembering that, when we seek God, God leads us *for his name’s sake*. God himself has a stake in this! Can it really end up so badly?

Let us pray: Thank you, heavenly Shepherd, that you lead us for your own name’s sake. Each day is like a new song. We want to remember how it goes, but we haven’t heard it yet. Be with us as we compose this next little movement in our lives. Amen.



Saturday, June 4, 2016

Text: Revelation 5:9

And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...”

There’s the “new song” again – this time not the new song of each new day, but the new song of eternity. Apparently we will all be (simultaneously) composing as we go, with the rhythms and timbres, melodic patterns and forms of “every tribe and language and people and nation” – and it will (miraculously) sound good!

Our human souls are haunted with this music we haven’t heard yet. Maybe it won’t even be music. Maybe it will be something we don’t know about, too glorious to

imagine – but for which music is the best, pale comparison God can give our earthbound brains. I’m speculating, of course. I’d settle for the music! But I’m not speculating that “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (I Corinthians 2:9).

Day by day, take in the beauty – sunsets, moonlight, birdsong, pounding waves, gently falling snow (but not this for a few months, please). Let these things captivate you. But then lean in to hear the Divine whisper: “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

Let us pray: Worthy One, may our hearts be haunted with this new song of eternity, till every step we take and every word we speak reverberates with its music, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

