

This is a day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

John 15:5

“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.”

A few years ago the US Army’s recruiting slogan was “Be all that you can be.” The words implied that potential recruits were not fully developed and that they could do more with their talents and with their lives, if they were properly trained and were pushed to a higher level of achievement. At a time when people are often content with “getting by” or with doing as little as possible, there certainly is a need for such encouragement.

The popularity of that slogan, “Be all that you can be,” is evident when you notice how many different agencies picked up and adapted those words for their own use. Colleges and universities often make reference to “being all that one can be” as they try to attract students for their institutions. They want students to believe that they can make them into something which they otherwise would not be. In a world which is very competitive, we certainly want to have the best brought out in us. We want to be all that we can be.

Members of the confirmation class, today you become communicant members of Trinity Lutheran Church. We could direct those words to you, “Be all that you can be.” Yet those words could easily be misunderstood, as if you personally could make yourself more than you presently are. Scripture makes it clear that our humanity limits us. That’s why the Lord Jesus speaks as he does in our text. Jesus wants you to be all that you can be, but he knows that is only possible as long as you stick with him. Therefore, **“Be All that You Can Be . . . with Jesus.”**

I.

Many people believe that they have all the answers. If there is a problem, they are certain that they already have or can quickly come up with the solution. That may be true in many areas. Problem solving is a skill that is receiving an increasing amount of emphasis in educational circles. Yet we still don’t have all the answers. When it comes to our personal relationships with each other and with God, that becomes painfully clear. Sin is a problem for which we have no personal solution. We can never be all that God wants us to be as long as we only look within ourselves, for we can never free ourselves from sin.

On Maundy Thursday evening, only hours before he went to the cross to pay for our sins, the Lord Jesus used the picture of a grapevine and its branches to teach his disciples that we need to be with him. Jesus said, **“I am the vine; you are the branches.”** Throughout the Old Testament the grapevine was used as a picture of prosperity, a picture of what God wanted his people to be. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches which are connected to that vine. God the Father wants us to be fruitful branches. In this case the fruit is not a bunch of grapes or an apple or a pear; rather it is everything that the believer does in faith and out of love for God.

The Bible also describes how grapevines are to be cared for. Unproductive branches are cut off from the vine, while the fruitful branches are pruned in order to make them even more fruitful. During my early years in the ministry, many of my members in Michigan cared for acres of grapevines. When I first saw them prune their vines, I was certain they had killed them. They cut off more than they kept. I soon found that this was the way to promote a bountiful harvest. The strength of the vine went into producing grapes, rather than into growing green leaves and unproductive branches.

Confirmands, the Lord has been preparing you for this day ever since the day of your birth. He brought you into his family through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. He claimed you as his own. But his work on you and in your lives did not end there. He saw to it that you were properly cared for. The Lord entrusted you into families where your parents demonstrated their love for you and for God by providing for your spiritual welfare, as well as your physical well-being. You have regularly attended worship services. You attended Sunday School and Trinity Lutheran School to learn more about God’s love and more recently you spent extra time learning the truths of God’s Word in Confirmation Class. I’m certain that there were many times when you wondered “why” -- Why do we have to do memory work? Why work through the Catechism, and then do it again?

This was the Lord’s way of pruning you. He was caring for you and preparing you to be productive members of his church on earth. Everything you have done had the purpose of bringing you closer to your

Savior. The Holy Spirit worked through that Word to help you to grow. Whether you are aware of it or not, the Spirit has taught you many things. You are stronger now than when the Lord began his work in you. But your strength is not something which you accomplished, it is the power of the Holy Spirit in you. You are what you because the Jesus has kept his promise to be with you.

II.

By the grace of God, what is true for the confirmation class is also what God wants for all people. Yes, “be all that you can be,” but recognize that this is possible only with Jesus. We are not self made men and women. We are the products of God’s love. Once our growth begins, God does not push us out of the nest and force us to be completely independent. In fact, the opposite is true. We remain God’s productive people only as long as we are connected to him. That’s why the Savior continues in our text, **“If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from you can do nothing.”**

Jesus encourages his disciples to remain in him so that they can continue to be his fruitful followers. If a branch is cut off from the main grapevine, the life-giving sap will not be able to get to the branch and the branch will die. Jesus Christ is the source of life for all people. As long as we are connected to the Savior, he can continue to pump life into us. Once we begin to rely on ourselves, we are in trouble. If we actually believe that we can do it all and that we don’t need Jesus anymore, we will spiritually starve ourselves to death.

Confirmation Sunday is in many ways a very happy time. Certainly, you are happy to mark this day. Your parents, grandparents and godparents rejoice with you. But I would be less than honest, if I would say that Confirmation Sunday generates only joy-filled thoughts and happy memories. Today forces me to remember past confirmations and to remember other confirmands who knelt before God’s altar as you will do this morning. They too promised to remain faithful, to remain connected with Jesus. Sadly, many have forgotten their promises. Too many confirmands think that they are through, that they have graduated. Too many parents breathe a sigh of relief, as if their responsibilities now come to an end and their children can now decide for themselves whether or not they want to go to church and hear God’s Word.

As I look around this morning, I see many who by the grace of God have kept that promise. Unfortunately, there are others who have had difficulty in keeping their promise. Jesus did not shortchange them. They are their own worst enemies because they have cut themselves off from the Lord of life. Jesus feeds us through Word and Sacrament. When we stay away from hearing and using God’s Word, we starve ourselves. When we don’t regularly come to receive the sacrament of the Lord’s body and blood, we rob ourselves of the life that Jesus wants us to have.

Today is not the end of your education as Christians. Today is one more step on the path along which God is leading you. Make full use of your connection with Jesus. Only then will you be all that you can be; only then will you be what Jesus wants you to be. Jesus is the vine; you are his branches. Remain in Jesus and Jesus will keep you as his productive followers. May the Lord bless you and may he keep us all close to himself. Only with Jesus will we be all that we can be. Amen.

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Confirmation Sunday

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