

John 15:1-8

As we gather together today, inside, indoors for Sunday worship, I want to begin by saying how wonderful it is to see your faces (or at least the unmasked portion of your faces!). It is so nice to experience this feeling of togetherness as the St. Paul's church community after being physically distanced for so long. During the past 13 and a half months, we have worshipped in ways we never imagined--at drive-in services, at home with family members, reading bulletins, scripture passages and sermons; and/or watching virtual services of other ELCA churches. All of these opportunities have kept us connected to God and safe during this challenging time. And now we are here, in-person, together, once again.

During this past year or so, as churches, concert halls, sports arenas, stadiums and other venues moved away from in-person gatherings, something happened. We began to see on television, especially at sports events, in the absence of some, or all, of their in-person spectators--"flat fans." For those of you who are unfamiliar with this term, a "flat-fan," that's F-L-A-T F-A-N, is typically a plywood cut-out. The front side is flat, while the reverse side is a brace in the shape of a diagonal or "L." The front has a photo of a spectator, oftentimes a person who holds a season ticket for that seat. The other side, has the rudder-shaped or "L"-shaped piece, that holds the "flat fan," upright. When placed in a chair, a "flat-fan" can actually look like a person is sitting in that seat! From a distance, "flat fans" give a feeling, (albeit a different feeling), of fans actually being present in that place. But, of course, we know that "flat fans," are not real, and that the person is not really there; they are simply pieces of wood cut off from a tree.

Our gospel passage for today speaks of God as the vinegrower, Jesus as the vine, and all of us as the branches. In these metaphors, we are branches, we are pieces of wood! But what marks the difference between being a "flat fan" piece of wood, and a growing, thriving branch, is our connection to God, to Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in

me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (vs. 5).

Some persons over the years, have made comparisons between the church and God's vineyard. The church is where we come to receive nourishment; to receive things from God that we need for abundant life. We gather in worship to confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness. We receive from God, again, as we hear God's word in scripture reading, preaching and song. We receive from God, as God's word strengthens us, and as the Holy Spirit works within us. We receive from God the Holy Supper. We receive the bread and wine, the body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We partake, as Jesus offered it to his disciples, when he shared the bread and wine with them prior to his death on a cross, or tree.

Our connection with God in worship, comes from our praising and thanking God, from praying, and from our receiving these many, many gifts from God; these abundant gifts of God's grace and love that strengthen us for our journey of discipleship. For when we are connected to Jesus' vine, we experience life with God! Not for the building up of ourselves. Not for our own vanity or pride, but for the building up of God and God's kingdom. We come to worship to abide in Jesus. We come to help one another and those who are not yet on the vine. We come to offer ourselves to God, to Jesus, so that we will bear much fruit! We come to worship, with humility. We come to give God praise, and glory, and thanks, for all that we are, all that we have, is a gift from God! And we proclaim in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"

We have learned during this time of the pandemic, that the church is not the building. While we enjoy gathering together in this sanctuary, we have stayed connected, because we have abided in Jesus. And now that we are gathering inside, in-person for worship, there is no need to fill the pews with "flat fans!" For those who are physically able to attend worship, you are

welcome and strongly encouraged to do just that, attend! If you were not attending regularly prior to the pandemic, please know that there is a place for you, the real you, the flesh and blood you, right here. Now is the time to be present with your whole being--your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength, as you abide in Jesus and gather together with others in this community. Now is the time to be present, offering yourself to God, as a branch on the vine, not as a piece of plywood. Placing a "flat fan," in your favorite pew, will not keep you connected to God, to Jesus! The "flat fan" is a part of the branch that will be pruned and eventually thrown into the fire, because God's word cannot grow and live in it. But God's word can grow and live in each one of us, if we abide in Jesus!

We are God's own, created in God's image. We are flesh and blood. We are part of God's growing, thriving vineyard, when we abide in Jesus. So, let us stay connected to Jesus, the vine. Let us be a part of the vine, not dead wood. Let us be a part of the branch that abides in Jesus, so that we will grow, and flourish, and bear much fruit for God's kingdom. Let us come to worship praising and thanking God. Let us come to worship to receive God's many gifts for us. Then let us go out from this place, sharing the good news of God's forgiveness, grace and love, and bearing much fruit. Thanks be to God. Amen.