A, Pentecost 18

Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church, Brookings, SD

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October 8th, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. The text for this morning’s message is from Isaiah 5:1-2, *“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded only wild grapes.”*

For the past four months or so our church paraments have been green. Green signifies growth and serves as a reminder of the theme for the Sundays after Pentecost, spiritual growth in the life of a Christian. Growth for a Christian happens through the watering, tending, fertilizing Word of God. As God’s Word is heard, the Holy Spirit applies it to our hearts and lives and causes faith to grow and bear good fruit. Like a gardener who tills, plants, waters, weeds, and watches the growth till the harvest, so God the Holy Spirit works within us through the Word and Sacrament to help us bear good fruit. The non-festival half of the church year, or the season of Sundays after Pentecost (today is the 18th Sunday after Pentecost) is marked by Scripture lessons that focus more on the growth of the Christian life. The scripture lessons teach the faith as the Holy Spirit works through the Word to bring about more knowledge of God and His will and enliven Christians to repent and be more like Christ to their neighbors.

That’s the season of Pentecost. There isn’t much excitement to it. That’s why it’s called the non-festival half of the church year. One of the last great festival was the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in tongues of flame and they took God’s Word out to the nations. For the past 18 Sundays after Pentecost and for the next ten or so more Sundays, we will continue to grow as we learn more about that Word of God that has gone out to the nations. When a garden or a field is planted, there is much excitement around planting and harvest, but not much in between. Plants grow slow. This where we still are – in the slow growth stage.

In our Old Testament lesson for today, the Lord, through Isaiah, sings a song about planting and harvest. He does everything right as a gardener but at the end of it all he has no harvest of value. He digs his vineyard, removes all the stones, chooses the choicest vines, chisels out a wine vat in preparation for harvest, fertilizes, sprays, even nets his grapes so the blackbirds don’t steal away his harvest. But when it comes to harvest, he discovers that his yield is worthless. The grape clusters he saw on the vine were imposters. His harvest wasn’t of the choicest vines like he planted, but wild fruit – worthless.

Isaiah lived at a time when God's people were outwardly successful, but inwardly they were spiritual imposters. The Lord sent Isaiah to tell them that he was not happy. Actually, God was very angry and his patience was about to run out and it was Isaiah's job to warn the people that God's judgment was coming and coming soon.

Every year farmers in our land invest thousands and thousands of dollars in planting their fields. Many even take the risk of going into debt to buy the seed, fertilizer and roundup needed for good growth. They invest wisely and prepare wisely. They don’t take the risk with a field that has poor soil or a bad location. They work hard, invest wisely, and wait.

So too did the Lord do with his people of Israel. They were his chosen people. He brought them to the Promised Land and not only was the land there rich for their needs of sustenance, but it was the place where the Lord built his temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. The patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David all lived and lead their people in receiving promises of blessing from the Lord. This place and these people were chosen and the choicest. The Lord invested greatly in them by sending prophets to weed out the unrighteous practices and beliefs that had crept in and through the prophets, remained near to them with a tending, loving eye. He constantly sent them word of promised through the prophets directing them to a savior, a Messiah who was to come. All they had to do listen, receive, grow and be that which the Lord made them to be – a people of his own possession.

But they rebelled. Outwardly, everything in name and place and size was right, but inwardly they we like imposters. Amongst the “Lord’s pleasant planting, he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!” (Is. 5:7). The farmer went out to his corn field of tall mature corn and pulled back the large ears but behold there were no kernels on the ears.

This is how it is with us. We have been chosen as God’s people through the water and word of Holy Baptism. Faith has been planted within us and the Holy Spirit continues to tend to that faith by means of the preaching and teaching of God’s Holy Word. The Lord’s Supper is given to strengthen and cause that faith to grow. The Ten Commandments are given and we hear sermons and read devotions that warn us of the evil that creeps up from within and without. The Holy Spirit works contrition (godly sorrow for sin) and repentance in us and the words of Holy Absolution (your sins are forgiven) hoe away and remove that sin from us. Now with sins forgiven and hearts washed clean, we have the free room to grow in grace and knowledge of what God has done for us in Christ. The fruit of love for God and for our neighbors grows and ripens.

But instead of loving God by desiring to hear and follow his word, we produce imposter works of faith and despise the preaching of God’s Word and follow our own heart’s desire. Instead of wanting to lead a more and more Christ-like life, we seek more and more to look and sound and act like those who mock Christ. Instead of growing in love toward our neighbor we grow in the imposter love of self. We don’t care about our neighbor’s well-being down the street nor do we care as we ought for those we vowed to love and to cherish till death parts us according to God’s holy will. Instead of giving and serving others for the sake of their benefit alone, we prop ourselves with pride and boast of all the good we did for three minutes for another person in need. We are the vineyard that produced wild grapes not in keeping with repentance.

What shall we do? There is no good fruit in us by our doing alone. Any good that was begun in us, by our own doing, by our own sins of idolatry of the self, pride, and deceit has become impostor fruit – good for nothing but to be thrown into the fire. We cannot by our own reason or strength believe or do anything good, but thankfully there was One who by his will and strength did everything good for us.

All of your impostor fruit that, when opened like an empty ear of corn, showed forth nothing, have been exchanged. All of your bad fruit of thought, word, and deed has been removed by the One who bore all of your bad works of sin to the cross. He left it there and from his wounds the fruits of righteousness flowed. To you he gives the fruits of faith. To you he gives his good and perfect heart of love and service toward your neighbor. To you he gives his righteousness before the Father. To you he gives his perfect fruit of righteousness that abounds over you in love.

From you, he takes all of your impostor works of sin and to you, he gives his holiness, his perfection, his name. No longer are you an impostor in fear of being thrown into the fire. You are marked by his name. You are filled with his good gifts and Spirit and you will continue to grow in his righteousness until the day of your harvest comes.

Until then, we’ll just continue on in this season after Pentecost. We will continue on I this season of growth as we are gardened and tended together by the work of the Holy Spirit through the word proclaimed, promises remembered, and sacraments received.

In the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.