**April 28th 2024 Cantate Sunday**

**Text: John 15:1-6** 0719

**Theme: Caretaking the Vineyard.**

May the mercy, and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ bring forth abundant fruit in your lives to God’s glory and the good of His kingdom. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: A parable was once told by our Lord, He said: *“A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.” (Luke 13:6-9)* This parable is a picture of the visible church on earth. In this church there are many trees, trees meant to bring forth the fruits of righteousness. Each tree is given special care and nurturing as we see here in this parable. Each one is looked upon by the Lord of the vineyard, seeking fruit thereon. With much patience He waits for years to reap the fruit of His work upon each tree, but there comes a time when His patience and long suffering run their course and it becomes apparent that the tree is not going to bear fruit. When that happens the axe is laid to the root of the tree, and it is cut down, for what good is a fruit tree that yields no fruit? It is good for nothing, and is cast into the fire. Yet even after many years of waiting and work upon this tree, He allows his vinedresser to expend even more abundant labor upon the tree, digging about it and dunging it in an effort to bring forth the desired fruit. No conclusion is given regarding the eventual result of that tree, whether the additional labor put in yielded the desired result, but one thing is certain; no lack of effort or labor is withheld in nurturing and taking care of the trees in His vineyard.

Beloved, we are the trees, the Father is the man seeking fruit and the dresser is our Lord Jesus Christ. We are found within the pale of the visible church of God, which church is made up of all who profess to be believers in Christ the Savior, but within which are found also hypocrites. This picture of the visible church of God on earth is the subject of our study for today. What is desired from all the trees and branches in His vineyard is that each one bring forth fruit, abundant fruit at that. What is the fruit that is desired to be seen? The apostle Paul spells out for us just the things that are desired, we hear: *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22-23)* Paul spells out nine distinct things which are the fruit which is sought upon the branches. Each one of these things is of a practical nature for the life of every true Christian. Paul says that love is a fruit of the Spirit. Love for God which proceeds from a thankful heart for the things which He has done for us. It is also love for our neighbor, especially our fellow Christians. Paul says in another place that charity, or love, never faileth. It is sincere love for one another and the salvation of our souls that should be evident in our behavior toward one another. Paul also lists joy; joy proceeding from the forgiveness of our sins, and the grace of God in bringing many into His kingdom of grace. Peace; peace because of the work of Christ in our behalf making peace between us and the Father, and peace amongst ourselves, for we have the same Savior and Lord. Longsuffering toward one another in our weaknesses and failings, having a forgiving spirit. Gentleness toward one another, not addressing one another with harsh words or subtle stabs, but gently correcting and exhorting one another. Goodness, which helps and pities our fellow Christians, bearing one another’s burdens. Faith, meaning to trust in God and build the faith of one another. Meekness which understands the state of our souls and the sin of our own hands and does not think of oneself more highly than he ought, gently admonishing an erring brother knowing that we, too, have sinned greatly. And finally, temperance having moderation in all things of this world, knowing that they are but temporary, and laboring for the meat which does not perish for our own souls, and the souls of our fellow Christians. These are just some of the fruits which each branch should produce and is looked for by the Lord of the Vineyard. Yet all the branches do not produce these things and those that do, are exhorted and urged to produce more. We will look at these things according to our text for today which is found in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel according to John beginning at verse one.

**Quote text here.**

Let us pray, O most glorious Savior of our souls, we implore Thee to make us branches which bring forth abundant fruit in Thy name. Keep us from being hypocrites or time believers which feign faith and fruit, but which are actually dead branches. Produce in us a sincere and strong faith in Thee, by which we will bring forth fruit more and more unto the perfect day. Keep us from idleness, pride, or self-righteousness, but show unto us that the fruit produced can only be brought forth as long as we abide in the Vine, that is, in Thee. Remove from the visible church any who do not abide in Thee, and grant them grace that they may receive the forgiveness of all their sins through a true and lively faith in Thee, and graft them back into Thyself. Guard us with Thy Word and Spirit that we may not be cut off from Thee, but may evermore abide in Thee. To this end continue the preaching of Thy Word among us, as dung is spread about the root of trees, that we may be kept in the true faith, and be as fruitful trees in Thy kingdom. And if it please Thee Lord to purge the fruitful branches which abide in Thee, by tribulations, persecutions, hard times, sickness, or the death of those we love, bring forth good for us out those things, that being thus purged, we may bring forth abundant fruit in Thy name. Help us to bear these burdens in faith and patience, suffering willingly for Thy truth and the good of our own soul. These things we pray sincerely and heartily in Thy name. Amen.

Dear Christians, let us attentively receive God’s precious Word, learning first that in caretaking the vineyard it is necessary that:

1. **Hypocrites and time believers be removed.** We read verses two, four, and six of our text: **Read verses here.** Our text is Jesus directly teaching His own disciples which are a picture of the visible truth. A question was asked Jesus which led to this teaching, and it was asked by none other than Judas Iscariot. This sheds some light into the nature of this teaching. Within the pale of the visible church are found also hypocrites and those who for a time believed, but in time of temptation fell away. It is not known for certain which of these Judas was, it is possible, and even probable, that at one time he did believe. Nevertheless, Jesus knew who he was and what he would do and thus our text teaches that any not found abiding in the Vine, which is Christ, will be removed and burned in the fire. Now these branches are said to abide in Him in verse two, but this is only in the sense that they appear to abide in Him, but if they truly did they would bear fruit. Because no fruit is found on those branches they are cut off the vine and thrown in the fire. These hypocrites will be shown for what they truly are, and this removal of them from the visible church is the work of God. Only God Himself knows who these are, we as the church cannot tell, for we cannot see the heart of any person. Thus God, as in the parable, demands that they be cut down, but not before providing abundant time, labor, and preaching to try and produce the fruit of the Spirit. Yet they must be removed, for if allowed to remain, there is a danger that they infect the whole church with their error and cause the good trees, the good branches to stop bearing fruit also. They must be removed for the health of the other true branches.

Now the removal of these branches based on their production, or lack thereof, seems to be teaching that God accepts a person based on the good works he produces, yet this is far from the teaching of our text. Jesus says that the branches cannot bear fruit apart from abiding in Him. This shows that the fruit of the Spirit is a direct result of the faith given unto those same branches. Just as any branch of a tree will not produce fruit if removed from its tree, so too, no man can produce the fruit of the Spirit if, through unbelief, he is removed from the Vine. This teaching is the same teaching as other places in Scripture where God declares that men shall be judged according to the things done in the body, if evil then damnation will result, if good than salvation. Men’s deeds are evil because of their corrupt nature, and the sin which infects them, and this, all men. A Christian’s good deeds are not a result of any good in him, but of the faith granted unto him by God, and the Spirit dwelling in him. Thus Jesus is teaching that those who have faith will produce fruit, those without will not. This is not teaching works righteousness but the fruits of faith, and fruits as an indication of faith. In the book of Matthew we are told that we shall know them by their fruits, meaning that we can recognize false teachers by their fruits. Yet this teaching can be applied to all who profess to be Christians, by their fruits ye shall know them. Thus all true Christians will necessarily bring forth fruit, but in caretaking the vineyard it is necessary that the:

1. **Fruitful branches be purged.** We read verses two through five of our text: **Read verses here.** The meaning of the word purge is often confused today to mean remove, however that is not the original or proper meaning of the word. To purge means to purify, to take away that which does not properly belong. Thus in purging gold or silver the dross, all things that contaminate the pure gold are taken away. It is a removal of sorts, but only a removal of that which defiles or corrupts from something meant to be pure. This is what God does for those branches which do produce fruit. It is the removal of all things which are impure, unnecessary, superfluous, or even corrupt. Though the branches abide in Christ, they are still branches with sin clinging to them, impure thoughts or motives, thus limiting the amount of fruit they bear. Our Lord, then, purges the branches so that they continue to bring forth more fruit. This is accomplished in us by God through chastening. The writer to the Hebrews said: *“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” (Heb. 12:11)* It is not the intention of chastening to make us miserable, despairing, wretched people, but to strengthen our faith, to rid us of impurities, and to cause much fruit to be produced. It is done for our own good. This teaching may be applied, in true Christians at least, to all things which happen in our lives which are unpleasant, trying, difficult, and hard. For example we have all at one time or another experienced rough financial times, this may be used by God for the purpose of purging from us the love of money and earthly things, to make us trust in God rather than ourselves, money, or things, and to cause us to be thankful beyond measure when times are not as hard knowing how hard they could be. In so doing God teaches us to be less attached to the things of this world and more willing to part from them for the sake of His Church and kingdom.

This is just one example of the chastening which takes place within our lives on a daily basis. Another may be the illness of a loved one to teach us to rely not on the loved one but upon God, and perhaps to direct that same loved one to seek comfort and hope in Christ. Remember that God, through the pen of Paul said: *“We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28)* These things are meant to be of benefit to our eternal souls, and while they are indeed grievous at the time, they serve to strengthen our faith and produce abundant fruit. Some years ago I and my family endured the miscarriage of our eighth child, as have others in the congregation, and while the grieving was long and hard, God used that to make me more thankful for the seven children which He has blessed me with, and at the same time reminded us of the fragile nature of this present life. At the time it seemed as if no possible good could be brought out of that awful time in our lives, but looking back, we can see the fruit which it produced in our lives. Likely more good will be brought from it, and thus we are told to expect purging, to expect the chastening of the Father, and to bear it with patience. There are many other more recent events which speak to this same thing, such as debilitating medical conditions, financial hardship, and the like. However, the apostle Paul said: *“We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience, and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed.” (Rom. 5:3-5)* May God be praised for His goodness in purging us so that we may bring forth abundant fruit for His kingdom, and may He grant grace and mercy unto all those who are found as hypocrites or heathen, that they may also receive the gift of faith which gives comfort and hope, which grafts us into the Vine as a true branch bearing fruit abundantly. May He grant unto each of us a strong faith in Him so that when tribulation and chastisement come, we may patiently bear it, glory in it, and bring forth the fruits of the Spirit more and more abundantly until the last day where we shall forever be purged from our flesh and sin. Amen.