

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE: SUNDAY 28 AUGUST 2011: EVENING SERVICE

Sing before: Hymn 15-1:2+4.

Let us commence this meeting with God by declaring openly to one another and to God:

I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Amen

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Song of praise: Psalm 146:1+3+8.

Prayer:

- **Doxology**
- **Worship**
- **Confession of sins**
- **Forgiveness**
- **Gratitude**
- **Prayer for the need of the congregation for the church, the authorities and the sinful world and appeal to God's promises.**
- **General prayer**
- **Enlightenment from the Holy Spirit for the sake of the ministry of the Word.**

Amen

Psalm: 80:5+6.

Scripture reading: Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1-17; and Heidelberg Catechism Lord's day 28.

Scripture text: John 15:4-5:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 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.

Theme: **True believers have only one place to be ... in Christ!**

Beloved church of our Lord Jesus Christ, this morning we had the glorious privilege of celebrating Holy Communion. In our self-examination on the way to the Lord's Table we gave serious consideration to three issues, namely, our humbling before the Lord because of our sins and sinfulness, our fixed belief in God's promises that, because of Christ's merit on the cross, we receive forgiveness of our sins and our sincere resolve to thank God with our whole life. To us the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a matter of great moment because we know how holy the Lord considers His Table to be.

But now one of two things can occur in us. We can again become so occupied by our everyday programme and routine that this celebration is pushed back into our mind, so far back that as from tomorrow we already begin to forget what we did this morning. If we allow our everyday life to do this to our celebration of the Lord's Supper we should be aware of it and prevent it.

And we can prevent it by taking careful note of the mystery of Holy Communion in which we all shared when we partook of it. It actually is a twofold mystery as appears from the formulary for the Lord's Supper and the Heidelberg Catechism. In Lord's Day 28, question and answer 76, we profess what it is to eat the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ. Firstly it is to embrace with a believing heart all the suffering and death of Christ and thereby to obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This first significance corresponds to the second main issue in our self-examination, that is, that we firmly believe God's fixed promises that all our sins are forgiven because of Christ's atoning merit and that his perfect righteousness is imputed and granted to us.

The second significance deepens the mystery so much that we fall into an adoring wonder at the great mercy the Lord bestows on us. Listen to what we profess: To eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his shed blood also signifies, moreover, to be united more and more to his sacred body by the Holy Spirit, who dwells both in Christ and in us, that although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones, and live and are governed forever by one Spirit, as members of the same body are by one soul. This second significance corresponds to the third issue in our self-examination. On the way to the Lord's Supper we expressed the sincere desire to prove our gratitude to the Lord with our whole life, to live a pure life before Him in true love and harmony with our neighbour.

In tonight's sermon I wish to illuminate this second significance of partaking of the Lord's Supper with the Lord's revelation in John 15. When we have a fuller understanding of this second significance it will become impossible for us to forget that we have celebrated Holy Communion. On the contrary, it will rather cause us to look forward to the next celebration of the Lord's Supper.

In John 15 the Lord Jesus is still busy with his parting sermon to his disciples in the night that he was betrayed. These parting words start in John 13:31 and continue to the end of John 16. One commentary divides this sermon in two parts. In the first part Jesus comforts his disciples because they are upset about what would occur shortly. The second part starts in John 15:1 and is about the point that Jesus sends his disciples to also glorify the Father.

Hear how Jesus begins this part: "***I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.***" Jesus does not say that he is the only vine, but that he is ***the true*** vine. In Psalm 80, which we sang, Asaph prays for Israel, the vine that the LORD took out of Egypt and planted in the Promised Land. In this psalm we hear how much care the LORD bestowed on his vine. He prepared a place for this vine in the Promised Land. The cultivation done by the LORD was so good that the roots of the vine grew and filled the land, it covered the mountains with its shade and sent its shoots out far and wide. But, despite all the care the LORD bestowed on this vine, it disappointed Him greatly. Asaph says that the LORD was so disappointed that he broke down the wall that protected the vine. The bitter result for Israel was that everybody came to plunder and ravage it.

In Isaiah 5:1-17 Isaiah writes that the LORD himself calls Israel his vineyard. Asaph was sad because the LORD had destroyed the wall around his vineyard. In Isaiah the LORD says why he broke the wall down. Israel had not done what the LORD had expected of his vineyard. Instead of producing good grapes the LORD's vineyard yielded only bad grapes. Israel was therefore the LORD's first vine, but it was a vine that disappointed the LORD. Instead of glorifying the LORD in their land with the good fruit they were expected to yield, they produced sour grapes. Instead of being a lamp to the nations (Isaiah 49:6), they became as dim as the nations. On the one hand they were stingy, miserly, with the life-giving gospel of God (remember what Jonah did), and on the other they lived as the heathens did. God had chosen Israel to be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Instead of entering other nations with the Word of God, they let themselves be invaded by the idolatry of the nations.

Beloved, Israel's departure from the purpose God had for them, reached its climax when they rejected and crucified the Messiah and despised God's kingship over them. But this did not derail God's plan with his people. Jesus Christ is the true vine who came to do what Israel failed to do. Israel is the vine who, by its own disobedience, destroyed itself. Jesus is the true vine who, in his perfect obedience to his Father, came this world to be sacrificed so that God's purpose with his people might be fulfilled. And God's purpose with his people is that they should bear fruit. They must glorify God with their lives so that more people will come to seek their salvation and beatitude with the Lord alone.

For the Lord's people to fulfil their purpose, that is, to bear fruit, it is necessary that something happens to them. A firm and intimate relationship between them and Jesus must come about. Jesus proclaims this relationship when He says: "***I am the vine and you are the branches.***" Jesus is the true vine and every true believer is a branch grafted onto the true vine. Brothers, sisters and children, we were grafted onto Christ when the Holy Spirit incorporated us into Christ with the true faith and we accepted all his benefits. The Holy Spirit incorporated us into Christ once only.

We know how relationships between people develop. At first they only know one another. But the more they deal with one another the closer the relationship becomes. Eventually the relationship is so close that the one can say to the other: "You have crept into my heart." That is what the Holy Spirit has done with the Lord's Supper. He united us even closer with the body of Christ. After this Holy Communion we are even more assured thereof that Christ is in us and we in Him. As Paul writes to the Ephesians: ***From Him the whole body grows*** (Eph 4:16). Therefore, every limb, every member of the Lord, grows out of Christ. And we can only grow out of Him if we are incorporated in Him.

During the Lord's Supper Christ Himself fed and nourished my and your soul to everlasting life with his crucified body and shed blood as surely as we received the bread and the cup from the Lord as certain tokens of the body and blood of Christ from the hand of the minister and tasted them with the mouth. And the Holy Spirit assured us that this is truly so. We have therefore through faith really received Christ in us because the Holy Spirit incorporated us in Him. With a believing heart we accepted the entire passion and death and by this obtained forgiveness of sin.

Beloved brother and sister and child, because we are incorporated into Christ and through faith we have received Him in us, Jesus gives us the following command: "***Remain in Me and I will remain in you.***" Christ has united Himself with us as closely as the bread and wine has become part of us at the table. Likewise we must now remain intimately, personally in Him.

How do we achieve this? Only by the persevering ministry of the Holy Spirit and through the Word can we remain in Christ. Is it not the Holy Spirit that incorporated us in Christ? At the Lord's Supper he united us even more with Christ. And the Holy Spirit assured us of it. We remain in Christ when we cling to His Word and cherish it and let it guide our lives. Jesus puts it in these words: "***If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, ...***" We shall therefore live in an intimate relationship with Him if we obey His commands. Our obedience to the Word of the Lord is then to us and to others the visible proof that we remain in Christ. And this obedience is the fruit that the Lord wants us to bear to the glory of the Father.

Jesus explains this command to remain in Him with the following image: "***No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.***" Even a child can understand the image Jesus employs. A branch that is cut off from the vine and put aside can never bear fruit. That branch does not receive the necessary nourishment from the vine.

If we do not remain in Christ we, too, shall not bear any fruit. He who is not in Christ is cut off from his Source of life, because we only share in the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit when we are in Christ. The Holy Spirit does not minister separate from Christ. Jesus Himself says so further on in His parting sermon (John 16:13). And the sorrowful consequence for someone who does not remain in Christ, beloved, is that he or she cannot glorify the Father, because he/she lacks the fruit to be able to do so. Just as it is impossible for the branch that is not in the vine to bear fruit, likewise it is impossible for us to bear fruit if we do not remain in Christ.

Therefore, someone who does not remain in Christ will eventually wither away. There is no way in which someone without Christ can bear fruit. If you are not in Christ, you have no share in the Holy Spirit and the Word of the Lord then becomes simply words on paper, incomprehensible and impracticable.

Brothers, sisters and children, unfortunately it also occurs that a branch grows from the vine, full of beautiful leaves but without a single fruit on it. Such a branch is useless. All it does is to extract valuable sap from the vine and show nothing for it. Likewise, Jesus says, there are people who are in Him but who never bear fruit. About them He says: "***My Father cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit..***" On the outside such a person appears to be quite respectable. He appears to belong with the true believers. Jesus calls such people hypocrites. They are people who act a part or dissemble. They only appear to be Christians. Superficially they appear to be children of the Lord but they were never truly incorporated in the Lord and therefore could not accept His benefits.

Perhaps Jesus was thinking of Judas, the betrayer. The other eleven disciples could not, until he betrayed Jesus, see that Judas was not truly in Christ. It was only when the temptation of a large sum of money beckoned him that he was discovered to be a dead branch. The Father removes such branches from Christ. He cuts them off from His church because they are there only to the dishonour of the Lord. They want to sponge on the love and grace of the Lord but do not want to do anything to glorify or thank the Lord.

Beloved, this does not mean that the other branches who are truly incorporated in Christ and accept all His benefits are perfect. Not in the least! We, who are in Christ and have at the Lord's Supper been reassured of it, still have many faults. We confessed that at the Lord's Supper. We are short on faith, fall short in zeal in God's service, are short in love of God and

our neighbour. And the defects in and on the branches that prevent them from bearing fruit that is beautiful and good will be cut away by the Father. That is why Jesus tells His faithful followers: "***Every branch that does bear fruit the Father prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.***"

With the Holy Spirit and the Word God prunes us. Sometimes He cuts deeper than we would have liked. But the comfort is that He does not cut us off. He only prunes the evil from us so that we may bear more and better fruit to His greater glory.

Beloved, we have the privilege of being incorporated in Christ through the true faith and of sharing in all His benefits. During the Lord's Supper this morning this mystery again occurred to us. The Holy Spirit united us even more with the blessed body of Christ. Let us remain in Christ. Let us, in love, encourage one another to remain in Christ. For, we do not live for ourselves, but for God. Only when we are in Christ, are we able to bear much fruit and glorify God in that way. We have the Holy Spirit who teaches us and guides us in fulfilling Christ's commands. In that way we shall not forget that we have celebrated Holy Communion, but rather longingly look forward to the next Holy Communion until eventually we, together with all the elect, shall sit at the wedding banquet of the Lamb.

Amen!

Closing prayer.

Closing Psalm: 65:3+4.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

Amen

Rev CCA Vrey
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Scripture: New International Version