

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2021
First Lutheran Church
St. Joseph, MO
Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and peace to you this day in the name of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There is an old Chinese folk tale that tells the story of a farmer who owned only one horse. He used that one horse for all his needs: to plow his fields, to pull his wagon, to ride to the village. One day a bee stung the horse, and in fright it ran away into the mountains.

His neighbor said: "I am really sorry about your bad luck in losing your horse."

But the old farmer simply shrugged and said: "Bad luck, good luck, who is to say?"

A week later the horse came back accompanied by twelve wild horses, and the farmer was able to corral all the fine animals.

News spread and his neighbor returned and said: "Congratulations on this fine bonanza."

To which the old farmer shrugged and said: "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say?"

This farmer's only son decided to make the most of what looked like good fortune and started to break the wild horses so they could be sold. In doing so, however, he got thrown from one of them and broke his leg.

At the news of the accident, his neighbor came, saying: "We are so sorry about the bad luck of your son's fall."

To which the old farmer shrugged and said: "Bad luck, good luck, who is to say?"

Several weeks later, war broke out among the provinces of China. The army came through the villages conscripting all the young men, but because the farmer's son was so badly injured from being thrown from the horse, he was not taken.

Once again, the old farmer's neighbor turned up to comment: "Well," he said, "it seems your son's misfortune might have just saved his life."

But even to this turn of events the old man replied: "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say?"

It is always a temptation, I think, to look at the circumstances of our lives and attribute them to God's favor or disfavor. Whether we call it providence or just plain luck, we readily attribute good fortune to a God who is pleased to give us good things. "God is being good to me," is the type of sentiment we might express at such times.

We are much more reluctant, though, to attribute bad fortune or bad luck directly to God being displeased with us. But when misfortune is encountered, thoughts of "What did I do to deserve this?" subtly hint at God as being one who has given us exactly what we deserved. This might well be true whether the fortune we are receiving is good or bad.

But valuing God's providence, or lack of it, in this way is a pretty slippery thing. The bottom line of that old Chinese proverb testifies to this: "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say." Our assessment is so influenced by our own perspective and circumstances at the time, what may appear at one point to be bad luck, could well turn out to be good luck later on down the road. And what is even worse is to attribute our circumstances solely to a system of merit. Such a system understands that good fortune is earned by doing what is right, while misfortune is likewise earned, except as result of wrong doing.

Jesus, however, would lead us down a different road. His good news to us is that grace is exactly what the word says it is — free and unearned. It is not about a system of merit — resulting in either good fortune or bad. And what he further says, and what our particular gospel reading this day centers in on, is that the place where we center this Christian enterprise of ours is not in the particular circumstances of our lives. It is not about good fortune or bad fortune. The place where we center ourselves is in the circumstance of *his* life, and in particular, in his resurrected life. "Abide in me," is what Jesus tells us in this gospel. Abide in me, remain in me, live in me, be permanently connected to me. Jesus is the place where we center our own living and everything else for us emanates from him.

Now to be sure, Jesus does talk about the circumstances of life. He talks about bearing fruit and about doing good things. But doing follows being. The first thing is to be in him, then the bearing of good fruit follows. What is absolutely crucial about the circumstances of our living is not whether the fortune we receive is good or bad, but whether or not we encounter such fortune connected to Christ, and in Christ, connected to each other.

Retreat leader Deborah Smith Douglas once took a vacation with her family in northern Italy. She was struck with how biblical the landscape of that region seemed: silvery groves of fig and olive trees, terraced slopes with row upon row of grapevines. The only grapevine she had ever seen before was the one in her great-grandmother's garden back in Ohio. But these Tuscan vineyards amazed her. Mile after mile of leafy vines and branches, trained to grow along wooden fences to make the most of sun and rain.

Every day during the week she vacationed there, Deborah would take walks amid those vineyards, allowing her a closer look at how they grew. Some of the vines were young and fragile looking, with translucent leaves and tiny stem-like branches — others were massive and gnarled and obviously ancient. It was difficult to see where one of the old vines ended and another began, and almost impossible to trace back the myriad tangled branches to the one vital root that grounded it in the soil. But she knew, of course, that connection was essential. If these abundant vines were to be cut off from that root, and the elaborate system of long-distance nutrients were to be severed, the branches would quickly wither and perish, and the small green fruit would never ripen for harvest.

This experience of examining a vineyard close-up for the first time led Deborah to think about the words of Jesus that we hear this morning:

*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.*

She later put down her thoughts in the following reflection:

The focus of much of our life in the church is typically on "producing much fruit" rather than on "abiding in Christ." We seem readily to appropriate the aspect of Jesus' metaphor that best affirms our own core values—productivity and effectiveness—while ignoring the contemplative element of "abiding" in God. We tend to be preoccupied with the urgent needs of the world that require us to "bear much fruit."

Consequently, there is a perilous tendency in Christian activism to cut ourselves off from the vine. In our passion for justice, in our impatience for change ... we can come to believe that social change is more

urgent than contemplative contact with the Source of all life. But in our lives as Christians, cutting ourselves off from the life-giving vine has at least two dangers. First, we will probably become engrossed in the visible results of our doing. Second, we may never develop much stamina for seasons of drought and failure. Either way, we risk losing the unity with Christ the Vine that he intends for us ... If we identify the life-giving goodness and sovereignty of God too closely with the fruitfulness of our own lives, when calamity occurs, we will be tempted to either feel abandoned by God, or to assume that God is neither good nor sovereign.

The truth Deborah Smith Douglas holds out to us is this: doing follows being. The promise Jesus holds out to us is this: when we remain connected to him, and through him, connected to each other, we will be fruitful people. If we make our number one priority in life our relationship with him and with each other, we will be fruitful people. It is not that all our problems will disappear and that all our fortune will necessarily seem good. It may well be that the fruitfulness we desire or need will not always be immediately apparent. But we will always eventually be fruitful—fruitful in a way God seeks us to be. For in our connectedness to God and to each other, the same love of God that raised Jesus to new life will be at work bringing new life through us.