

[Jesus said,] **“Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.”**

There was once a man who I thought might be interested in joining the congregation. He had attended services. He had family who were members. So I was talking to him about how a person could join the congregation. The first step is learning what we believe as a congregation, so I told him about the class I do with the Small Catechism. I went on for some time about that until I ultimately asked him what he thought. I will always remember his response. He said, “What’s in it for me?” I guess that was a good question, because I didn’t have a good answer. I don’t remember what I said. All that I remember is that I wasn’t very satisfied with my answer.

“What’s in it for me?” is a thought that is deeply seated in our human nature. Nobody has to teach us to look out for ourselves. From the day we were born we have a very keen sense for our own advantage. A good idea is an idea that’s good for me. A good deal is a deal that’s good for me.

If we are only looking for our own advantage, then church membership can be a pretty tough sale. To become a member we start off with maybe 12-15 hours of instruction. Perhaps the most important part of being a member is that you come to church for about an hour a week. A lot of people find that hour to be boring. All the while you should pay for these opportunities with your offerings.

And then, if you prove yourself to be a faithful member by doing all these things, and if you have the right gifts and talents, then you might be asked to serve on a board or committee. That’s more time, more effort. If you’re lucky, you might even get to be involved in some dispute or controversy with all the stress and trouble that goes along with that. Sound like a good deal?

I could answer these downsides of membership in several ways. You’ve probably already thought of some. But I’d like to take on the main idea itself. We naturally believe that a good deal is a deal that’s good for me, but who said that that has to be the definition of a good deal? I know that there are many authorities who teach that everyone must look out for their own interests. I know that big businesses follow this rule. I know that even our common sense teaches this. It’s as simple as asking the question, “What do you want?” Do you want more or do you want less? The answer seems obvious.

However, what is left out from all these thought is that God is the giver of our daily bread. Whatever any of us has or doesn’t have is from God. There are people who have worked their fingers to the bone, and they have very little. There are lazy people and foolish people who have hit the jackpot, so to speak. By the seeming accidents of circumstances or heredity they have much more money than any of you will ever have. It is not enough to believe in yourself. It is not enough to ruthlessly follow your own interests. I know that we are taught that over and over, but that doesn’t make it true. If God doesn’t crown your efforts with success, then you won’t succeed.

But let’s suppose I’ve failed to convince you. You still believe that you can bless yourself with your smarts and your hard work. In this supposition I’ll even grant you the best of successes. You live a charmed life from the time you are 5 until you are 85—80 years of brilliant success! What then? Psalm 49 says: **“Even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.”**

Psalm 49 is a remarkable psalm. It is kind of the opposite of what is so often promoted as wisdom among us. Among us it is almost like people believe that they won't ever die. They think they can grab as much as they can forever. Psalm 49 says, "No." Man is an animal. He lives for a while, then he dies. The psalm brings up the death of sheep. Maybe you've seen livestock that has died and has begun to decay. That will be our fate too. What good will your living for yourself do you then? What good will your always asking, "What's in it for me?" do you then? You will decay like a farm animal that has died.

We are taught over and over again that the way to win at the game of life is to seek your own advantage. We are taught that so insistently as an unquestionable truth. It is easy to believe, then, that this is what we should do. This is what is noble and successful. Living for yourself is not noble or successful. Just the opposite: It's gross. It's animal-like. It's Darwinian.

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit teaches another way. The Holy Spirit has inspired the Scriptures to teach a different way to live than what merely comes naturally to us. For example, Paul says that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control**. I didn't hear anything in that list that talks about you being the greatest. I didn't hear anything that says you must come first. On the contrary, I heard social things—things that have to do with our relationship with others. The fruit of the Spirit makes you to be a blessing to others. I like being around people who are **loving, joyful, peaceful, long-suffering, kind, good, loyal, reasonable, and who keep themselves under control**. I like being around people like that. I'd like to be a person like that. I'd like the fruit of the Holy Spirit to be in me.

How can I do that? There's only one way to produce this fruit. Jesus talks about it in our Gospel reading. He says, "**I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.**" You cannot produce this fruit except by being grafted into the true vine. Even if you were to try as hard as you possibly can, you wouldn't be able to do it. It would be as futile as a branch that has been cut off from the vine trying very, very hard to produce a nice cluster of grapes. Whatever grapes get produced in such a manner won't be very good. Only by abiding in Jesus, and Jesus abiding in us can we produce fruit. Apart from him we can do nothing.

Which means that going to church is not foolish. Going to church is wise. Church, understood rightly, is for the purpose of being connected to Jesus. Jesus is in Church according to his own promise. He says, "**Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them also.**" We are gathered in Jesus's name. Jesus is here in our midst.

What do we do when we have congregated together? We spend a good deal of our time with the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures. These Scriptures teach us things that are different. We learn what is truly good and life-giving.

And you've probably already thought of how Jesus is present with us in a special way with the Lord's Supper. By that eating and drinking Jesus's body and blood, Jesus abides in us and we abide in him. This communion with Jesus bears fruit, as we pray about in the post-communion collect. In that prayer we thank God for this salutary, or helpful, gift. We then implore God, that of his mercy, he would increase our faith toward him and our fervent love for one another. Those are some remarkably fine fruits.

Going to church is not a waste of time. It is the opportunity to be changed by God. God changes us from being selfish, self-obsessed, evil unbelievers to being believers who are being formed in the image of his Son. Jesus is here with his power and grace.

Therefore we can put up with some labor and sacrifices to continue to have Jesus in our midst. Without the labor and sacrifices of us members, this congregation will not be able to continue to help people. We need volunteers. We need money.

We also need to put up with annoyances and troubles to continue to have Jesus in our midst. Our flesh is prone to boredom, our minds are prone to wandering. We have to discipline our flesh. We need to work at worshipping and listening. We also need to put up with the annoying flesh of our fellow congregants. Unfortunately, our fellow congregants are just like us. They can offend. They can annoy. If we will not put up with other people's weaknesses and sins, we'll quit congregating; we'll quit helping each other.

This would be a shame, because these small troubles are nothing compared to what God does through his Word and Sacraments. Jesus is here with his answer to death and his antidote to our evil. He is the vine. We are the branches. If we abide in him, and he abides in us, then fruit will be produced to the glory of God the Father.