

Rev. Thomas Nelson Green
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/6/2012, The Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 15:5

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

[And Jesus said], "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Each in its own way the two great festivals of our Lord proclaim the gracious presence of God with mankind. Christmas announces that God has slipped into the stream of human history, has taken to Himself our flesh and nature and has been born of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He has come to be with us as our Teacher and Savior, our Lord and King. Throughout the joyous season of Christmas the presence of God's Son is very much with us. Easter, the Feast of the Resurrection, proclaims that Christ who was dead has scattered the darkness of evil, shattered the bonds of death and is living and present among His people. This divine presence is the source of our Easter joy. The name of this parish church bears testimony to His presence. Immanuel! God is with us!

Here in this place of worship, through Word and Sacrament, through song and confession, the Blessed Trinity does indeed make His presence known. He is here and we rejoice in His presence. It is for this reason that our corporate worship plays so significant a role in our lives. In the company of the faithful, of those who are other Christs in this world, we can indeed recognize the presence of God! It is not on the Lord's day but on the weekdays that His presence seems less apparent to us. At Christmas and Easter and in corporate worship we can indeed experience and feel the presence of God. However, we must ask, under the press of work and responsibilities and recreation and entertainments, is the presence of God a daily reality for us?

There is good reason for asking this question. We hear so often these days about people being burned out, about unrelieved stress, about anxiety and depression! Undoubtedly at least some of us are victims of stress, anxiety and depression! Why? Faced with the demands of our daily responsibilities we all too often feel alone. Unaided we must carry on our work; unaided we must solve problems, unaided we must meet deadlines, unaided we must deal with emergencies. It is no wonder that we feel overcome with all that lies ahead of us as we begin a new day. Now, surely not every day is begun with a sense of weariness and

dread, not every day is devoid of joy. However, no one can completely escape days of darkness. But it is possible for us to begin such days without that frightening feeling, “Now I am alone.”

Indeed, the message of the Gospel for today can be summed up in a single familiar word, “Immanuel!” God is with us; we are never alone. God is not just with us. He is present to give us life and strength and all the power we need to live productively and with courage and strength for whatever challenges we encounter each day.

The Gospel for today assures us of His presence. As He did so frequently, Christ uses a pastoral image when He speaks of His presence among His followers. His words reveal the love and delight he had in the beauty and wonders of nature. It is no wonder that he found pleasure in nature for He was its Creator... “Without Him was nothing made that was made.” The vineyards of His beloved homeland became the illustration of His relationship with His followers. He is present and as closely connected with us as the vine is to its branches. Through its life-giving connection with the vine the branches live and bring forth much fruit. Apart from the vine the branches can produce nothing.

The recognized presence of Christ is therefore not just a precious, but not exactly essential blessing; it is an absolute necessity! Apart from Him we can do nothing! There are some who would agree with this statement, but would limit it only to redemption and sanctification. They would surely insist that one can be saved from death and be assured of a place in his heavenly home only by the grace and love of God. This grace is made his own through faith in God and His Christ.

This understanding is correct as far as it goes. However, it does not go far enough. God is present not merely when we are at corporate worship or in private prayer. He is present not only to assure us of our salvation. He is present not only when we are engaged in acts of charity, acts which we call good works. He is present not only when we love and cherish the members of our families. He is present! At all times and in all places and under all circumstances. He is present in the most demanding moments of our life, when it seems that we do not quite know what to do, yes even when we feel confident, He is present. The wise Christian under all circumstances recognizes this presence. He also knows that he is dependent on the presence of Christ to accomplish his goals. You see, apart from Christ we can do nothing!

His presence is a necessity. The image of the vine and its branches makes this clear. A branch of a grapevine appears to have in it life and fruitfulness. It is

perfectly able to bring forth fruit and do so in abundance. But life and strength are present in the branch only when it is connected with the vine. Sever the branch and it slowly dies. No life, no fruit, no anything. So it is also with us. To the world we may appear to be strong and focused, with wisdom and confidence and ability to accomplish whatever we set out to do. This vision of us is not mistaken! However, severed from Christ, apart from His life-giving presence, we can do nothing. Apart from Him strength and wisdom and confidence disappear. St. Paul echoes this truth when he writes, "I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me." Alone he would amount to nothing. With the presence of Christ he becomes the fearless apostle to the Gentiles.

How, then, do we practice this presence of God's Son, without whom we can do nothing? Practicing the presence of God begins here in our corporate worship. The atmosphere in this holy house proclaims that God is with us. The presence of the faithful proclaims it. More importantly, here God's voice is heard. He speaks to us in the lessons. His voice says to each of us, "I am with you and without Me you can do nothing." It is not merely His spirit and voice that are present. He is present in a manner that we can taste and touch and handle. In the Holy Eucharist His true and substantial Body and Blood are present, distributed and received. We eat His Body and drink His blood and this heavenly food is incorporated into our beings.

And the practice of the presence of God continues! Begin each day by greeting Him! It is much better to begin a day by saying, "Good morning, God," rather than saying, "Good God, it's morning." Begin the day with prayer, be it long or short. When you talk to Him, He is present. Take a comforting passage of scripture with you as you go through the day. A verse from the Psalms such as, "*I sought the Lord and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.*" When you begin a task that is difficult and daunting, begin it with an earnest prayer, "God, help me!" "God, be with me now!" He will deliver you from all your fears even as He delivered the psalmist. When you take a break from your tasks, take it with Christ. Thank Him for his aid and direction. When you return home, thank Him for your family. Remember always that while He has promised to be present, you must take Him along with you as you move through your day.

Today the Gospel presents this urgent invitation. Do not live a day without recognizing the life-giving presence of Christ! With Him you can do all things, but without Him you can do nothing. Amen!