I am the Vine

 Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Spring it seems has finally sprung loose from it’s icy shackles. It’s time for things to start to bud and bloom and soon I’m sure the landscape will take on more of a greenish color as the trees begin to grow out their leaves. It’s the season where when you go past Home Depot or Lowes or basically any superstore that has a garden section, there will be a plethora of plants and flowers. There will also be an abundance of one of my least favorite things in the world, mulch. Now there are some aspects to yardwork that I don’t mind. I don’t mind mowing the grass or trimming bushes or removing stumps. But I hate working in flower beds. I know that there are a lot of people who greatly enjoy the reward of a beautiful garden and I have to say I enjoy looking at a beautifully planted garden too. I like it when the yard and the garden look good, even if I don’t like putting the work into weeding and mulching and planting. Well today our text deals with a bit of gardening lingo as Jesus describes himself to us as a vine. A vine seems like a funny comparison to me. One year my spring project was to remove a vine from our back yard that was strangling the bushes that were back there. Let me tell you that was a project. I didn’t think that it was going to be an easy thing to remove this vine from our back yard but boy I was not prepared for what I was about to deal with. First the manner in which vines grow is seemingly unpredictable. They wrap around things and find a way to navigate through the smallest cracks they can find in order to find sunlight. Vine branches also produce little tendrils that reach out and grip the branches of other plants in order to pull the vine forward and move these other branches out of the way. If you watch a vine grow in slow motion it seems like a slow-moving snake that coils around and suffocates anything it grips. I remember from my own experience that once it was cut at the root it was very difficult to get the vine to yield. Getting rid of a vine also means that one has to be sure to pick up all the debris. They are able to grow up from a simple stalk and in no time can reclaim the ground that has been lost. So why is it you think that Jesus chose to use a vine as an analogy for himself?

 You see there are instances in which vines can be used for beautification. For example, would Wrigley Field, the home of the Chicago Cubs and one of the most iconic stadiums in the United States, be the same without the ivy-covered walls? There are some houses that allow a creeping plant to grow up its chimney. In a big city, a small patch of green can be a welcome sight. But it all depends on how you look at it. There are many in our culture and even many Christians who may look at Christ as a vine in a bad way. I spent Friday at the LWML convention in Grand Rapids and the bible study that was done there had the theme of “Jesus is in Control”. As Christians, we accept that God is in control of our lives, or at least we should. Sometimes we misinterpret God’s intentions and we take the idea that God is in control and run with it in the wrong way. There are many who look at Christianity as a strict and lawful religion that doesn’t allow anyone to do anything they want to do. Perhaps you yourself once felt this way about the church. Who here went to church throughout their life, from infant until now with never putting up a fight? Meaning that every Sunday come worship time there was nowhere on earth that you would rather be? The truth is that we often make God out to be an authoritarian, a God who loves power more than anything else. Of course, throughout the course of history man has played his own role in this. In fact, 500 years ago, a conflict was in it’s infancy regarding this fact. That is how the Reformation came about when you think about it. Man had corrupted the church to such an extent that Martin Luther, a monk, a man who studied the scriptures day in and day out, a man who knew the word of God, knew it to be one of judgment and condemnation. There are many accounts that tell us what a conflicted man Martin Luther was. He would read the Gospel and find that he could not measure up to the demands that God made. There are accounts that after confession, Martin Luther would head back to his room, only to remember a sin he had not confessed, and thus request that the priest see him again in order to absolve him. That is how the word of God was being taught. It was a very law-oriented style and it caused people to despair. In this case, the word of God can become a vine that would snuff the hope and life out of believers.

 But this is not what we mean when we say that God is in control. Jesus is not a vine that seeks to choke us, rather he is a vine that seeks to free us. Vines have a multitude of purposes so is it any surprise that Jesus tells us that he is the vine? Is it any surprise that the blood of Christ we will drink at this altar is the fruit of the vine? It is not a coincidence that this is the case. What’s more is that we need to look at Jesus not as though he is a separate person from us, but rather that he is a part of us. Since we have been washed in the waters of baptism, Jesus has entered our lives. He states, “**I am the vine; you are the branches.**” We are an extension of Christ in this world. His work is shown in us and through our actions as we go about our lives as Christians. But this does not come without a warning as Christ says, “**Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away…If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.**” So, who are those who abide in Christ? Those who abide in Christ are those that come before the presence of God and admit their guilt. When we admit our sin and show true repentance, we bear the fruit of faith. That fruit is forgiveness. And because we are branches that bear fruit, God prunes us, just as the text says. Earlier we read the story of an Ethiopian Eunuch that came to faith and was baptized. In this story we find that Philip happens upon him while he is reading a text from Isaiah 53. In fact, it is one of the texts that we read on Good Friday. It prophesies as to the manner in which the savior of the world will meet his end. Do you think it was by accident that Philip happened upon him while he was reading this very text only a short time after Christ’s death and resurrection? Certainly not. For God had used his Holy Spirit to plant a seed of faith in this man, and he sent Philip along to nurture it and grow it through teaching him the scriptures. And at the end of this story we see the fruit that comes from this exchange when this man demands that his chariot stop so that he could be baptized. Believe it or not God works in our lives the same way. Of course he does! After all we are a part of his vine. We are children, covered by the robes of Christ’s righteousness. God is constantly working on us and in us, pruning away the bad, destroying the Old Adam within us, and nurturing the new Adam that arises in us as we are forgiven. Jesus is the vine, our God is in control, but our God is not controlling. For our Gospel is not one of regulation, but one of freedom. We are no longer regulated by our sin so that death is the final end for us. Rather we are free from death and separation from our God. We are free to be his children, we are free to be his branches as he uses us to go out and bear the fruit of the Gospel. We are free to be examples of Christ’s humility and love for his neighbor. We are free to be the inheritors of eternal life. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.