

# 5th Sunday of Easter

## Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

### April 28, 2024

“I am the bread of life” (Jn6:35);

“I am the light of the world” (Jn8:12);

“I am the gate” (Jn10:9);

“I am the good shepherd” (Jn10:11);

“I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn11:25);

“I am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn14:6);

“I am the true vine.” (Jn15:1)

Unique to the Gospel of John are these seven statements that Jesus begins with “I am.” The phrase “I am” reflects the scene in Exodus (Ex3:14) when God identifies himself to Moses with his declaration “**I am who I am.**” This statement became a way to connect with God personally and was used throughout Israel’s history to convey that God always was, always is and always will be. In using this expression, Jesus is explicitly identifying himself as God; God’s presence on Earth.

Today’s gospel reading, from the farewell discourse of Jesus after the Last Supper, includes the last of these “I am” statements: “I am the true vine.”

To anyone who is not familiar with gardening, Jesus’ lesson regarding the vine and the branches, particularly the practice of pruning, may require further elaboration. To me, pruning looks like a process that is terribly wasteful. That severe cutting back of what may be beautiful flowers or rich foliage seems to be all wrong. But I, for one, am slowly learning from Mary—our family gardener—of the necessity of, and proper timing for, pruning because anyone—like Mary—who does understand gardening principles, knows that it is only through that painful cutting away that new, stronger, richer and more fruitful growth occurs.

The people of Christ's time were a lot closer to nature than most of us are today, so in today's Gospel we find Christ using the very clever metaphor of the growth of the Vine to teach His followers some important lessons:

- Firstly, He is the vine and we are the branches. Historically, Israel, the chosen people of God, understood itself to be the vine, while God was the vine-grower. But in this gospel passage, while the vine-grower is still God, the vine is no longer Israel; now it’s Jesus. It is Jesus who is the true Israel, the chosen one of God through whom all nations will receive blessing. It’s Jesus who is the source of life, who nourishes **us, the branches**, so that we might be healthy and grow, to produce fruit that will last.

- Jesus' second point is: Just as some of the most wonderful fruit in a garden comes after careful pruning, so too does the concept of pruning apply to us.

How are we pruned? In today's gospel, Christ teaches us that we are already pruned by means of his Word. However, there are times in our lives that we accumulate a lot of deadwood; the deadwood of bad habits, sinful relationships, lack of discipline and wrong ways of thinking. Through our reading and listening attentively to the Word of God in the teachings of Christ and actually acting on His Word, we are pruned. We then can look at the deadwood in our lives and, perhaps painfully and with great sacrifice, allow it to be cut away. Whatever is properly pruned always results in stronger, healthier, and more fruitful growth. We all need to be pruned from time to time for healthy spiritual growth. If we resist it or deny it, we will wither and die; for as Jesus told us: **"...without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither."**

To maintain our spiritual health—to remain pruned—Christ also left us with the sacraments and sacramentals. The Eucharist, the "source and summit of all Christian life" (SC47), along with Reconciliation and Eucharistic Adoration, are among the "tools" we have at our disposal to "remain in [Christ] and [His] words remain in [us]."

Next Saturday, May 4, we—all Catholics in the Kansas City metropolitan area, both Missouri and Kansas—have an opportunity to allow ourselves to be pruned at BeholdKC on the north lawn of Liberty Memorial. BeholdKC begins at 4:00pm with confession and performances by local choirs, followed by Mass & Adoration, and concludes with a concert by Steve Agrisano, who through his music and storytelling weaves a passionate message of faith, hope and love. Go to the event website, [BeholdKC.org](http://BeholdKC.org), for more information and free registration.

Just as Israel was pruned as it journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land and the disciples were pruned as they journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem, for us today, the church becomes one body as we are pruned on our journey toward eternal salvation.