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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fifth Sunday of Easter
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Lectionary Year B: John 15:1-8

When a person is questioned about why he or she has not done something, a common answer is "I've been too busy!" It could be anything ranging from not spending enough time with the family, to not calling the folks back home often enough, or to not getting the lawn mowed. "I've been too busy" is, one might say, an easy answer, regardless of whether or not this is actually true.

But if the "I've been too busy" excuse can get tiresome, the ways in which others respond to this excuse aren't always that helpful, either. When I was in seventh grade, I recall being coaxed by a few people at church to join a youth choir that was getting started. Even the pastor was after me to join up; I told him, "My schedule is kind of full," to which he responded, "Would you like to see my schedule?"

Needless to say, that struck me as rather arrogant and rude. To this day, I don't believe in saying, "Look how busy I am" in order to motivate someone else. Neither "I'm too busy" nor "Look how busy I am" are helpful statements; in many cases, both of them lack a certain kernel of truth!

In case you're wondering, I did finally capitulate and join the youth choir, and, because our church services there were broadcast on local television, videotape of me singing must be in some

archive somewhere. If you want to find something you can really embarrass me with, start searching now! And, might I add, "choir" would be a rather charitable descriptor for what I was in. More accurately, I helped what would've been a duet become a trio. A few more voices would've been necessary to make it a proper "choir," I think.

Indeed, we do live in very "busy" times, even after a pandemic has slowed things down a bit. If people aren't working more because of economic concerns, they're simply doing more because they're pressured into thinking that everything is necessary. Parents of high-school age kids know plenty about this: the dizzying time commitments related to extracurricular activities leave little time for things that might be more important...like family, faith, friends, leisure, culture, travel, and so on..

But how about getting beyond the mentalities of "I'm too busy" and "Look how busy I am"? This might require some sacrifice, but then think of what you might gain. One less hour at the office, one less extracurricular activity for the kids, one less fast-food meal because you won't have to be rushing from one place to the next. If the lockdown of a year ago yielded any benefits to families, they would've included more meals at home together, more time to enjoy one another's company, and more time to communicate.

And now, as restrictions are being eased, we can think of allowing more time for church activities (both worship-related and

otherwise), and of how we might renew our commitment to the church's ministries.

When one's life is so ordered, it may, indeed, be more fulfilling. But we know very well that it is easier to add things to the "to-do" list than it is to delete them. The real hard work is asking ourselves "What is truly important?" And this is a question that people seem increasingly afraid to ask themselves, probably because they won't like what the answers will be.

But when a person becomes "too busy" for certain things -- and especially when one becomes "too busy" to cultivate one's faith -- something withers and dies...one's relationship with God.

Just as the person who's "too busy" for family and friends threatens those relationships with an untimely death, so too can the person who, for whatever reason, doesn't have time for prayer, study, or worship threaten another relationship with an untimely death. This relationship -- that between God and the individual -- is one's ultimate relationship. It is the true relationship which grants us life, love, and salvation -- all things that we cannot obtain by busying ourselves with an ever-widening array of distractions.

Jesus' famous "vine and branches" sayings provide some of the finest illustrations of this relationship. Living in proximity to vineyards, Jesus has material for these sayings virtually at his fingertips. While, apart from Tippy Creek, we're not exactly in wine country, we can still picture other types of vines that

don't necessarily produce grapes. We see vines creep their way up latticework, up the sides of chimneys and buildings, and onto just about any site where they were introduced (to the point where they may become pests). But the tremendous length of vines makes Jesus' image so powerful; a vine's length conveys continuity, that even though we are nearly two thousand years away from the Jesus who walked the earth, we are still a part of his vine.

Indeed, as he said: "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5a).

But if we, as the branches, separate ourselves from Jesus the vine, we no longer (as Jesus puts it) "abide in [him]." In its most basic sense, "abiding in Jesus" means being a part of his body (the church) and having a relationship with him. Jesus offers pretty severe words or warning to those who do not abide in him; he says, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (John 15:6).

This might refer to those who willfully separate themselves from the vine, however...like those who denounce their Christian faith or like those who, in western Europe, want to "undo" their Baptisms. But what about those who, as I mentioned earlier, are "too busy" for God? Certainly, they are not actively opposing Christianity...they just don't have time for it.

Well, maybe they suffer the most, because they have something deep down inside them that's gasping for the breath of the Holy

Spirit, hungering for the Bread of Life, or longing for the Light of Christ. That "something" is their branches that have been left to wither -- again, not willfully -- but instead like the garden that somehow finds itself forgotten around the middle of summer. And yet, our chief concern as churchgoers is often geared toward the mere presence of those branches instead of their well-being. If anything, the whole Body of Christ assumes a responsibility for tending to the branches of the vine -- to help them abide in Christ, to show them (by our own example) what it means to abide in Christ, and to offer them the good news of life, love, and salvation. These are the very things contained in the vine itself!

But all that is easier said than done, right? Great in rhetoric but virtually impossible in reality, right? Perhaps one place to start would be with one's own self -- how is that branch doing? After all, you really can't address someone else who's withering on the vine when you're withering yourself! How are you, to borrow Jesus' image, "bearing fruit" as a branch of the vine? How might the life from your branch spread to the neighboring branch that is withering?

And we really need to consider how our fellow "withering branches" see us. If they think we're withering too, they won't see much good in coming to us. This is why, for example, it is so important for St. Anne's to continue its longstanding commitment to community outreach. Last Sunday, it was a great joy to pre-

sent, on behalf of the congregation, a generous donation to the Court Appointed Special Advocate program; this is the ripple effect from St. Anne's of God's work in the world, and, if anything, it's fruit from the branches. And from the standpoint of basic P.R., it's good for the church in our community.

Yes, the good news is that we can do something. Remember Jesus' words: "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit" (John 15:5b). Jesus opens up this possibility for us; indeed, we have life through him, and thus it is as natural for us to bear fruit as it is for a vine to yield grapes...as long as everything is properly tended.

Tending, however, means being a little less "busy" and giving a little bit more time to God. And note that bearing fruit really isn't the same as "work." Branches of a vine bear fruit not by way of their own effort, but by way of the water, food, and sunshine that they receive. So in actuality, Jesus is calling you to receive him, to abide in him, and to become an instrument of his grace and peace. Don't be surprised if this finds you working less but accomplishing more, because abiding in Christ makes things happen -- more often than not -- effortlessly and naturally...just like a vine bearing fruit.

You're never "too busy" when the vine is feeding your branches with life, grace, and peace.

Amen.