

## Bearers of Fruit

John 15:1-8

May 10, 2009

Words we will never hear from a mother: “Just leave the lights on. It makes the house look more cheery.” “Sure, I used to skip school a lot too.” “If Nancy’s mom says it’s okay, that’s good enough for me.” “Let me smell that shirt. Yeah, it’s good for another week.”<sup>1</sup>

A seven-year-old girl wrote on the inside of the Mother’s Day card she gave to her mom: “Dear Mom, I’m going to make lunch for you on Mother’s Day. It’s going to be a surprise. P. S. I hope you like pizza and popcorn.”<sup>2</sup>

A woman decided to quit work and take care of her new baby daughter. There were immeasurable hours of playing peekaboo and other games. The game playing and rhyme making took a toll. One night she smacked her bare toes on the corner of a dresser. She grabbed her foot as she slid to the floor. Her husband rushed to her side asking where it hurt. As she looked at her husband through her tear-filled eyes she moaned, “It’s the piggy that ate the roast beef.”<sup>3</sup>

Well, enough Mother’s Day jokes and on with today’s reflection on our Gospel text.

When George Voinovich was governor of Ohio he commented in one of his State of the State speeches: “As an old gardener, I have found over the years that sometimes it takes a little pruning to get a healthy plant.” He made the comment to introduce his ideas about some possible budget cuts. While I didn’t agree at the time with some of the places he believed cuts should happen and I don’t agree today with some of the cuts proposed by our state and local politicians, the statement certainly represents the horticultural truth referenced by Jesus in this morning’s passage – pruning that which is non-productive or useless allows needed resources to be channeled to other areas thus strengthening them.

There have been times in my life when I’ve tried to think of myself as a gardener. For several years after Dorothy and I were first married we planted gardens – some of the time food was actually produced and once in awhile I even helped weed. We even subscribed to Mother Earth News - something we continued to do for years after we stopped gardening. I loved reading the articles even though I don’t remember trying one of the things suggested in any issue.

We attempted another garden last summer with the same results – tilled it, planted it, grew a few things, but for the most part discovered again that gardening takes time – that you have to pay attention to a garden if you want to reap what you have sown. So, this year we are joining forces with others who are planting a community garden in the yard behind our rental property at 49 W. Henderson Rd. It’s part of the Extending the Table effort with much of the product going to the Community Resource Center. If anyone else wishes to take part, we are usually out there on Tuesday evenings at 7:00 (of course I’ve not been there yet).

Jesus and his followers were in the Upper Room and in the midst of an apparently lengthy teaching session Jesus offered this picturesque, agricultural description of how his followers were to go about leading. Utilizing his audience’s familiarity with the activities necessary to properly care for a vineyard, Jesus instructed them about their role in the living out of the faith – their role of leading by serving.

Jesus used this agricultural illustration because he knew his audience would understand what he was talking about. Vines were all over Palestine. Everyone knew about the tremendous amount of attention vines demanded if the best fruit was to be produced. Everyone knew about the need to carefully prepare the soil. Everyone knew that the vine bore two kinds of branches - fruit-bearing and non-fruit-bearing. Everyone knew that drastic pruning was necessary in order for the vine to adequately develop and conserve its life and energy for the next season. Everyone knew that the non-fruit-bearing wood of the vine was so worthless that the only thing that could be done with it was to make a bonfire of it and destroy it.<sup>4</sup>

There are two ideas in this text I want to spend a few minutes with you on this morning. The one is the whole interrelatedness idea between the gardener, the vine, branches and grapes and what that suggests for us. The other is the idea that the purpose of this process is to produce fruit.

Depending on the translation you read, the writer has Jesus talking about “abiding” or “remaining” in him as being the way to produce the fruits he desires. One writer points out that we are not actually called to produce the fruit but to dwell in Christ or to let Christ live in us in order for the appropriate fruits to be born.

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. Branches are nourished by the nutrients that flow through the vine. In order to receive those nutrients the branches have to remain connected to the vine. Jesus Christ is the vine through which the resources necessary to produce the fruits of the spirit flow. In order to receive those resources we have to stay connected with, remain in touch with, abide in Jesus. Combatting, resisting temptations to keep us from fulfilling our fruitbearing role involves our being strengthened by the resources supplied by Christ.

A man who drank heavily was converted to Christ and did pretty good for several weeks. There came a day though when he passed an open door of a tavern and the odor drifting out aroused his old appetite. About the same time he saw a sign in the window of a nearby café: “All the buttermilk you can drink – 25 cents.” The man rushed inside, ordered a glass and then another and then another until he was so full of buttermilk there was no room for that which would certainly be injurious to him. One of the ways we are able to do what we need to do is by “remaining” in Christ – spending time with him in a way that he is able to fill us up to the place where there’s no room for anything else to get to us.

A pastor was appointed to a very active congregation. That is, they were active throughout the fall, winter and spring. There were several choirs – many children, youth and adults in Sunday School, an envious program to be sure. They had programs to feed the hungry, house the homeless, comfort the bereaved, visit the sick, and a prayer ministry with prisoners in the local jail. But their summer involvement was a different matter.

The church practically died after Memorial Day though, and every year it seemed to take longer and longer to get the people back involved after Labor Day. The pastor was concerned. The leaders told him that the sparse summer worship attendance had always been that way. “Our church doesn’t do much in the summer. People are traveling or at their cottages up at the lake. The kids have been in school all winter, so parents like to give them a break in the summertime. But, don’t worry, pastor, everyone will be back in the fall.”

But the pastor did worry. He knew that when members of the body of Christ were absent from worship for more than one or two weeks, the ministry of the whole church was diminished. Jesus’ words in John’s gospel came into his mind, “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

After much prayer and several sleepless nights, an idea came to him. He decided to suggest that they not meet on Sunday mornings during the summer and instead meet in the middle of the week once a month. The pastor sent a letter to all of the members outlining his plan about a week before the next scheduled board meeting.

When it came time for the meeting, the church was packed. After the pastor made his recommendation for the new summer worship schedule, several irate members got up, one after the one, to speak against the plan. Why, they had never heard of such a thing! Not have worship on Sundays? It was positively unchristian! When the vote was taken, the pastor's proposal was unanimously defeated.

The pastor didn't comment after the vote. When they asked him to pray at the end of the meeting though he stood up and asked, "How many of you plan to be in worship this summer?" The members looked at each other with surprise in their eyes. Slowly, one by one, they realized that they had already cast their vote once and began to raise their hands again. Then the pastor bowed his head and prayed, "O Lord, thank you for the faithfulness of this congregation."

The secret to living out our Christian lives and bearing fruit on behalf of God's kingdom is that we remain in Jesus Christ. God is the gardener – Christ is the vine – we are the branches and we will bear fruit if we stay close, stay connected, to Jesus.

So, what about this fruit we are to bear? What is it?

First, we need to keep in mind that the purpose of fruit-production is to glorify God. Our fruits are those things which we do or say which cause those around us to think about God.

In R. L. Middleton's book My Cup Runneth Over he notes that life is not made up of all of us making great sacrifices but of a host of little things. He writes about the meaningfulness that smiling and kindness and thoughtfulness brings to living. He suggests that the "fruits" that are possible for us all to produce – the "fruits" that are realistic – that aren't dependent on us being in the right place at the right time – that aren't dependent on us being able to put our beliefs into words to help someone come to know and believe for themselves – the "fruits" that everyone of us can bear – are the fruits of the spirit that St. Paul noted in his letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Using kindness as a simple example of how any of us can bear fruit Middleton offers this illustration: "The day couldn't have been drearier, yet a spot of sunshine seemed to follow the young marine and his girl with her bouquet of roses as they strolled arm-in-arm down the crowded street. 'Lost in a world of their own,' I thought. As I watched them I saw an old lady being pushed along toward them in a wheelchair. Suddenly, some ten steps beyond where they passed, the marine took the roses from the girl, turned and placed them tenderly in the old lady's lap, brushing her cheek with a kiss as he did so. Then grabbing his girl by the arm again, I heard him say to her as they resumed their walk: 'Darling, we have a lifetime of roses ahead of us!'"<sup>5</sup>

Bearers of fruit – that's what we are called to be and enabled to be if we stay in touch with Christ – fill our being with the spirit – spend time with God. Our ministry is to bear fruit.

There was a manufacturer who decided it was time to expand his business. Everyone knew his product was an excellent one. So, he hired fifty people to market his product. He taught them how to make appointments -

telemarketing techniques – people-handling skills - customer service. He made sure that each and every salesperson had everything he or she needed to succeed in completing their task. He even appointed a sales manager as a resource person and motivator for the others. Then he left on a three month business trip.

When he returned, he went to check on how his new product was selling. He discovered that only five of the fifty were actually selling. The rest were using the product personally but were hanging around the office hoping that people would come into the office and ask about the product. No one had done so yet, but these forty-five salespeople were patiently waiting for the right moment or customer.

Obviously the sales volume was low. The manufacturer was not happy. He asked the forty-five inactive salespeople, “Why aren’t you out there selling like I told you to?”

They answered, “Well, those other five were so much better at it than we were we let them take care of outside sales.”

The manufacturer continued his inquiry, “So, did you at least make the appointments for them? Do the customer service for them? What did you do?”

The forty-five responded: “We left all that stuff for them. They were just so much more talented, we figured that they must have had a gift for that sort of thing, so why compete? We just stayed here and made ourselves available in case any customers came in to find the product.”<sup>5</sup>

The resource I obtained this little parable from suggested that the situation reported is much like what exists in many churches. It’s as if we’ve rationalized that what Christ wants us to do as the church, as his followers, is to practice our faith with one another and to be ready to share it with others if they happen to find their way through our doors. It’s as if we’ve become comfortable with those who are already inside with us and we’ve lost our fervor for sharing the good news beyond our doors.

There’s a fictional story told of an encounter between an angel and Jesus when Jesus returned to heaven after his earthly ministry. The angel asked him how he planned to continue the work upon earth. Jesus told him that before he left he instructed the disciples to tell others and for those to tell still others. The angel, with a puzzled look on his face, asked, “And if that doesn’t work, what other plan do you have?”

And Jesus said, “There is no other plan.”

Jesus expects us to carry out his plan of spreading the good news. He expects us to bear fruit so that God might be glorified. It’s not enough for us to just come and watch and let someone else do the inviting – the sharing – the witnessing. Jesus is quite clear – that’s not going to cut it.

Our role is to bear fruit. Fruitbearing involves us living it out, walking the talk, verbally sharing its reality in our lives.

Although there have been some things done in the name of “church growth” in our day that leave a bad taste in many of our mouths, that is still what Christ established the church to do – to grow – to spread the good news. If a church is not growing, it is at best stagnating, but more likely dying. The invitation to Christian

discipleship this morning is an invitation to be bearers of fruit and to do the thing necessary in order for that to happen – in particular abide/remain/stay connected to Christ.

Let us pray.

Prayer: O Lord, we do want to stay connected to you – not just because we want to avoid the fires of life – but because we truly want to be in ministry with you. We want to meet human need – to offer forgiveness to those burdened with guilt – to offer friendship to those who are lonely – to offer food to those who are hungry – clothes to those who are cold – homes to those with inadequate shelter – hope to those who have been smashed by daily living.

Prepare our soil, O Lord, that we might be better able to receive the nourishment you offer us. Fill us with your grace, with your forgiveness, with your joy, with your peace that we might bear the fruits of our connection with you. In your name we pray. Amen.

1. The Joyful Noiseletter, Vol. 24, No. 5, May 2009, p. 2.
2. Ibid.
3. Parables, Etc., Vol. 21, No. 4, June 2001, p. 1.
4. William Barclay,
5. R. L. Middleton, My Cup Runneth Over.