

“What Does it Mean to ‘Bear Fruit’?”

Today, I ask you to think in mental images of “much fruit.” The gospel lesson for today is about fruit. The word, “fruit,” καρπον (karpon) is used more often in John 15:1-8 than in any other place in the Bible — six times in our text for today. Three of those times we hear about “much fruit.” So since “fruit” is the dominant theme of our gospel lesson for today, I ask you to think in mental images of “fruit” and “much fruit.”

Close your eyes and bring up images of trees laden with fruit: apples trees, pear trees, orange trees, all groaning with enormous quantities of fruit. Picture those fruit trees in your mind. Muse over the opulence of nature. Now think “much fruit” . . . more than that . . . more than that. “Much, much more fruit.”

What is fruit? The New Testament does not give us an exact meaning for the word; but as we read the Gospel of John, we come to realize that fruit is a symbol for the love of Christ . . . the attitudes of Christ . . . the actions of Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us ***“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self control.”***

(Galatians 5:22) Nine of them. Nine glorious virtues that sweeten life for those who give and those who receive, yet referred by Paul in the singular, “the fruit” not “the fruits.” Fruit is so good, so tasty, so flavorful. The same is true with those nine virtues of the spirit, the fruit of the spirit: they sweeten life.

So let’s get back to imagining pictures of trees and bushes laden with fruit. First, let’s see pictures of fruit that are part of our lives today: apple trees, peach trees, cherry trees, pears, and plums — all aglow with abundant fruit. Mixed into the dark green leaves see those colors of red, orange, crimson, bright green, purple. See the boughs almost touching the ground because of the weight of so many pieces of fruit.

Then imagine other fruits that grace our tables. See blueberry bushes covered with plump blue fruit. Picture raspberries so abundant that the

birds haven't been able to carry them off. Look at wild strawberries running along the grass, tiny and sweet.

Now let's try to imagine some of the fruit that Jesus and His first hearers would have eaten: Can you see pictures of fig trees? Olive trees? Date trees? No, that's harder for most of us; we've never seen a live olive, date, or fig tree. How about clusters of grapes — dark purple and blue, red and green. Grapes so abundant that the vines can barely hold them.

When we see in our minds pictures of “much fruit,” we presuppose a healthy tree, a healthy connection between the tree and the branch, and a healthy branch. When that happens; a healthy tree, a healthy connection and a healthy branch, it is almost automatic that we will see much fruit. We all get the basic idea. A good fruit tree produces good fruit. This is a no-brainer. We all “get” the allegory that Jesus used. Good fruit trees produce good fruit.

Our Lord Jesus wants us to produce much love, attitudes of love, and actions of love. But how do we do that? What enables us to produce the kind of fruit Jesus wants from us and wants us to have? It all has to do with the connections.

If a branch is IN the tree, that branch will produce good fruit...whether it be apples, peaches, pears, cherries, oranges, blue berries or whatever. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to produce much fruit. But we can do that only if we are connected to the branch, the True Vine. That's what Jesus means by the word, “*abide*.” We tend to use that word to mean, “stay with . . .” but the word in John's Gospel, repeated here eight times (gee, do ya think Jesus wanted to emphasize this?), is the Greek word μένω which carries the notion “to take up residence.” “*Live in me*,” might be an useful paraphrase, “*and let my word come alive in you*.”

What does that look like? Are we to adopt a monastic lifestyle? Do we lock ourselves away from the world so we can devote all day to prayer and meditation? That is, indeed, the idea behind monasteries and nunneries. In earlier days, some believers went out into the desert to find

God, think on God, hold to nothing but God. For some that is a calling, and so they pursue just that. But for the rest of us, who are still engaged in the world, it means something less . . . pious? strident? strenuous? Finding the right word here is difficult.

Certainly this does have to do with piety . . . those are the actions we take that help us to focus on God, remind us through the day that we walk in God. Take, for example, daily Bible reading — not for information, but for formation. Jesus wants us to abide in His Word. Reading with devotion is essential. Not just to read through a passage, but to abide in it. Let the words sink in. Let them echo in you. Taste them. Sense them.

There is an ancient discipline known as *Lectio Divina* that for centuries has been guiding Christians in entering the Biblical text. It involves four steps — lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio — reading/listening, meditation, prayer, contemplation.

Let me guide you though just the lectio phase briefly.

Step One: As I read a few verses from today's Second Lesson, ask the Spirit to let your ears be attentive for a particular word, the one word the Spirit wants you to focus on. When you hear that word, stop listening (even though I may be still reading) and let that word come into your heart.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Step Two: This time I have asked one of our female members to read the same verses because that change in voice can give a different perspective. This time, though, you are asked to take that word the Spirit gave you in

the first reading and let it sink in deeply as you ask where that word touches your life. Since Christ is the Word, you will be asking where Jesus touches your life.

Step Three: Now I will read the verse yet a third time. This time, as you hear these words, ask yourself, *“In these verses, what is Christ calling me to do or become?”*

It works a little differently in private, and this is a group experience, generally done with a group of four to eight. But I hope you can see that we are not just dashing through a reading. We abide in the Word, and we let it abide in us. I have printed an insert in your bulletin with format that gives you a little more information about this discipline. The discipline is designed for group practice, but can be used by yourself with great benefit.

This is but one way that Christians have found that will allow themselves to be drawn into the Word, to abide in the Word. It is an essential part of the Christian life, but one that has been downplayed or downright ignored by many today. It is what Jesus is calling us to do in today’s Gospel — to spend the time to take up residence in Him and in His Word.

If you have a devotion time, you are already ahead of the pack on this. If you have never entered into any kind of spiritual discipline that allows you time to be with God — and for a lot of us, this is difficult, because time constraints always seem to push such things to the margins — if you have not done so before this, you really need to make this a priority. And that’s what it takes — it takes the discipline to be in the disciplines of prayer, meditation, contemplation and the rest.

Some people do it by rising an hour earlier each day . . . some take time to turn off the TV and use that quiet time in the evening . . . some plan regular times of retreat, where for a day or two they can go off and just spend the day with God.

However you make it work for you, make it work for you.

Actually, that's the worst advice I can give on this, for two reasons. First, I would succeed only in raising the level of guilt in those of you who have told yourselves for years that you need to do this, but haven't. Second, and more importantly, you can't do it . . . only the Spirit can do it. So ignore that first sentence and listen to this one: The Spirit wants to give you more of Jesus in your daily life. Let Him open you up to that. Let the Spirit guide you into some pattern that works in your life — and it may look very different from your neighbor's, your spouse's, your friend's patterns — a pattern that works in your life so that your heart is focused on Christ.

There is one other factor at work here. There are lots of branches on a tree. There is never just one branch but a huge number of branches on a tree. There are numerous Christians, billions of us through the centuries, who are IN Christ and together we produce much fruit. We are never alone; so don't ever think that you must find Jesus in your life all by yourself.

I have found great comfort and support over the years because I asked a fellow-Pastor to become my spiritual director. It has been a great blessing to me to find another Christian as yet another partner along the journey, but one whose vested interest is nothing more than my pilgrimage. If you can find such a mentor, guide, fellow-traveler, rejoice that Spirit gives such blessings.

One caveat — the community of faith is not the vine. Jesus is the Vine. We are the branches. Unless there is a very real and strong connection to the vine, there will be no fruit.

In the final sense, bearing fruit means becoming more Christ-like day by day. Now, do not misconstrue that as some kind of “*every day in every way we grow a little stronger.*” No, you know as well as I that life is too filled with vagaries and pitfalls ever to think that we can tiptoe through the tulips to heaven. BUT, it is especially during those times when life is smashing us in the mouth that we need to know our connection to the Vine. Weak, tenuously connected branches are often blown away when

the winds howl.

So, Jesus reminds us, the Father is the vinedresser. As such, He prunes us. Lindy Black says it this way: *“We know that just because we want something to grow doesn’t guarantee that it will. We also know that getting our roses to bloom means cutting back the canes; that encouraging the growth of the tomato plants means pinching off the gangly stems; that getting a second bloom from the impatiens, or the pansies, or the sweet peas and zinnias, means cutting back the early flowers. If something is growing where it doesn’t belong, we pull it out and call it a weed. If something is dead, or not growing well, we cut it off. If something is too big, or too small, we move it, stake it, tie it back. This is what John’s gospel describes of God and the disciples’ learning process. Gardening is not an armchair activity, and neither is faith. There are choices to be made. It is difficult work.”*

Comedienne Rita Rudner said it a little more concisely: *“Men are like a fine wine. They all start out like grapes, and it’s our job to stomp on them and keep them in the dark until they mature into something you’d like to have dinner with.”*

The storms of life have a way of demoralizing us — stripping away our faith and hope. Which is why, when we are in the calm, we need so desperately to cling to Christ, take up residence in Christ, be nourished in Christ. Let the Spirit guide you into those disciplines which strengthen you — to resist in the storms, and to find unmitigated joy in the calm.

Amen.