

## “Fruitful Christians”

John 15:1

April 29, 2018

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

As I have mentioned on numerous occasions, I lived among and served farmers in Nebraska for nine years. Often, I tried using agricultural analogies in my sermons, but many of the analogies didn't work. The reason was obvious. The people who I was serving had lived on farms for generation. I, on the other hand, was a city boy with no experience in farming but trying to act as if I did. Sometimes, we have difficulty understanding Jesus' agricultural parables for the same reason. We lack the agricultural background. However, the analogy which Jesus uses in our Gospel reading for today is so easy and so obvious that even city boys and city girls like you and me can understand and apply this without screwing it up.

The subject for Jesus analogy is fruit growing. Since we don't have much experience with grapes and grape vines, for the sake of illustration, let us use the idea of apples and apple trees. The first thing to remember about this illustration which Jesus uses is so obvious that the story doesn't mention it. That is, the tree produces the fruit, not vice versa. In other words, you do not go out and put an apple on the ground, expecting it to produce a tree. The apple has no part to play in the production of the tree nor does it have any say in how the tree is cared for. That is the job of the farmer.

The apples do not grow of their own accord. They received nutrients which flow from the roots of the tree up through the trunk and out into the branches. Sometimes, this procedure breaks down and doesn't work. Branches fail to produce apples or break off from the tree. So, what is a farmer to do? He does not look at the bare branches in the trees and say, “Even though they are taking up space and using nutrition for no apparent result, I'll just leave them alone because they are such pretty branches.” Of the branches that have broken off and laying on the ground, the farmer never says, “I think I'll leave those branches on the ground. Who knows? Maybe some apples will come from them.”

No! Unproductive branches which have died are cut off in order that the apples may be produced by other branches. And no one seriously thinks that a heap of dried fruitless branches will produce apples while gathered together on the ground. Once branches have died or broken off the tree, there is no hope for growing apples from them and they are burned.

The action taken seems to be harsh, but it must be done. There is no room for sentimentality. The object here is to produce fruit. Period! The farmer is not in this line of work to produce pretty looking branches, nor leave branches that have fallen on the ground. Whatever is not bearing fruit needs to be destroyed. Whatever IS bearing fruit must be pruned. This means to cut back and remove the parts of the branch which are no longer healthy or useful so that it may be more productive and produce more fruit.

Jesus uses this picture as a description of the life of a Christian. First of all, the Christian life is the result of the Christian faith and not the cause of it. In other words, just as it is silly to place an apple on the ground and expect a tree to grow from it, so it

is silly to think that doing good works can cause a faith in God and relationship to him to appear. The source of all fruit is the tree from which it grows. The source of all spiritual fruit is Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit. We cannot produce spiritual fruit on our own. However, God the Father who has created us and given us life physically has also re-created us in the waters of Holy Baptism and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has given to us life spiritually.

Like a farmer in an orchard desires that the branches of the apple trees he has planted produce apples, so God the Father desires that the branches (you and me and all Christians) of the apple tree (Jesus Christ) produce fruit. This would seem to be plainly obvious, but it isn't as we examine the lives of many who call themselves Christians today.

We see the obvious failure of us and other Christians to live the Christian life and to produce the fruit God desires. It is not that we are unable to produce fruit as Christians. After all, we are connected to the life-giving and fruit producing power ever since our baptism. It is that we willfully choose not to produce fruit God desires or we have broken ourselves off from the source of life and power, Jesus Christ.

There seems to be an unspoken understanding among many Christians that living the Christian life and producing spiritual fruit is either not important or not necessary. This wrong attitude and sinful lack of action usually boils down to a misunderstanding of grace. Some Christians will say that, since we are saved by grace, that's all we need concern ourselves with. Living the Christian life and producing fruit is not important. All that is important is our salvation and the saving faith needed to grasp and receive that salvation.

However, that makes no sense. Would a farmer in an apple orchard feel that everything was complete after planting trees that produced branches? Not at all! The farmer plants the tree which produces the branches in order that the branches might produce fruit. The emergence and growth of branches on an apple tree is only the beginning of the apple tree planting process. Growing fruit is the goal.

In the same way, do you think God is satisfied that everything is complete after planting the word of God in your hearts, calling you to faith in the perfect life, sacrificial death, and the wondrous resurrection from the dead of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sin and the new life within you that starts now and lasts eternally? Not at all! God, solely on his own and by his power alone, has brought you to faith in Him and to life in Christ. However, this is only the beginning of the whole Christian making endeavor. Producing the fruit of faith is the goal of the Christian life.

In fact, it is the reason why God saved us in the first place. We love to quote Ephesians 2:8-9 where the Word of God says, "for by grace you been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Our life with God, both here on earth and hereafter in heaven, is completely and purely a work of God which we had absolutely nothing to do with. It is purely by God's grace through faith, both of which – salvation and the faith which we receive salvation – are God's gifts.

However, to stop at the end of verse 9 and ignore verse 10 and the rest Holy Scripture and say that, since we cannot do anything to save ourselves, it is

unnecessary or even optional for us to ever do anything at all, is to be in error. For Ephesians 2:10 goes on to say, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

We, as Christians, have been created specifically to produce spiritual fruit as much as apple trees have been created specifically to grow apples. This is not only for dedicated "super Christians". Producing spiritual fruit is not optional. It is something God expects and demands from everyone who calls himself or herself a Christian. This is not being legalistic but being truthful. It is not adding on to the requirements of salvation, but simply describing what the results of that salvation shall be in every Christian.

Those people who choose to merely look like Christians, yet do not produce fruit in accordance with faith will not be allowed to remain. As Jesus says in our text, "Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he (The Father) will take away." As far as those who have disconnected themselves from Christ, Jesus says, "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." Jesus is very direct here. Anyone connected to Christ who does not bear fruit or anyone who has cut himself off from Christ will be thrown into the fire of hell.

Does this mean that we suddenly start trying to do as much good as possible as if our salvation depended upon it? Does it mean that we, as poor, miserable, sinners simply give up and conclude that we cannot produce fruit? By no means! There is Good News in the story.

First of all, remember that it is God who has given you life freely and fully. He will also produce in you the fruits of faith. As branches of an apple tree may be pruned – trimmed and cleaned up – in order to grow more apples, so as branches connected to the tree of Christ, we may be pruned, that is, cleaned up and fit for service, again because of God's grace and the new life He is given to you in Holy Baptism. Jesus' words to His disciples are for us as well, "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." You have the desire, the opportunity, and the power to produce fruits of faith because you are in Christ Jesus through baptism.

The key to continually producing fruit is to continually abide in Christ Jesus. Jesus says, "if you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Do you desire to produce the fruits of faith? Just like an apple needs to be connected to the branch on the apple tree so that it may draw forth the nourishment from the tree to grow apples, so we need to be connected to Christ so that we might draw forth the nourishment from His Word in order to grow the fruit of faith.

Coming to here the Word of God and to participate in the Sacraments in public worship is not a fruit of faith. You are not doing something for God here, nor are you serving your neighbor in faith. Here, you are being nourished and strengthened that you might produce fruit for God and serve your neighbor in faith. In this day and age, only hearing the Word of God on Sunday mornings (even if it is every Sunday) does not seem to be enough nutrients for you to produce fruit fit for this day and age. Jesus encourages you to abide, that is, to continually be connected to

Him, in order for you to produce fruit. In order to produce the fruit which God desires, means reading the Bible on your own for your own personal benefit. It means for every Christian, not just so-called super Christians, to be involved in Bible study with other Christians here in the congregation. It means regular family and individual devotions to help feed you that you might produce fruit.

Having been richly fed and spiritually strengthened, then produce fruit. Commentators have noted that fruit is never actually defined here but appears to be doing that which God would have you do.

There is the fruit of attitude which is key in producing all manner of fruit. Paul describes it in the letter to the Galatians, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23) Abiding in Christ Jesus and being nurtured by His holy Word, the Holy Spirit will produce these attitudes and personalities in you.

There is the fruit of faith which is also important and consists of obedience born out of love. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment of God's law was, He answered this way, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-38) Faith, wrought by the Holy Spirit, will produce love which shows itself in loving and serving God by loving and serving our neighbor.

Doing the good which God desires occurs everywhere. It is not limited to church, but it certainly does take place here. This afternoon, we will have a meeting to see how each and every one of you may serve God and neighbor here in our congregation, either by holding an office or by supporting those who do. It also takes place in our homes, as we serve one another in love. It takes place in our schools where teachers can serve students and students can serve teachers. It takes place in our places of work and community where we love each other as we love ourselves and show forth action in keeping with that love.

Are you a fruitful Christian, producing Christlike attitudes and God pleasing acts of service to all people? Are you a withered branch that produces no fruit, but hopes to be left alone in the church, the true Vine? Are you a branch that has cut yourself off from connection to Christ through a lack of nourishing and strengthening of His Word and hope that there are no consequences? Do not be deceived. As the farmer in an orchard cuts off branches which do not bear fruit and picks up branches which have cut themselves off from the tree and burns them both, so also branches within the true Vine of Christ which choose not to produce fruit or cut themselves off from Christ so they cannot produce fruit, will be picked up from the ground or cut off the tree and thrown into the fire.

Remember, as the farmer in the orchard remembered that the goal is not to just look like an apple tree, but to actually produce apples, so the goal of God's people is not simply to look like Christians, but to actually produce fruits of faith, attitude, and service. Abide in Christ. Abide in His Word – read, heard, spoken, studied and distributed. Be nurtured, strengthened, encouraged, and enabled to produce the fruit God desires. Be fruitful Christian for that's the only kind there are. Amen