

BEARING FRUIT

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Friday, October 25, 2019

Scripture: [Galatians 5:1, 13–25](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

We're continuing in our fall theme, *Growing Together* today... listening for the ways in which our ancestors and scripture have used the language of growth in nature as a pattern for the growth and nurture of the Christian Community.

I'm working from the ground up. We have talked about the ways in which our roots sustain and give life to us... and when we engage the full richness and diversity of them, they can make a strong base for us. We've talked about the ways our branches connect into the true vine of the holy, and some about how we might even prune a little around the edges to have more of that life.

Today we get to the sweet stuff. Today we talk about fruit. Last week, while talking about vines and branches, Jesus got us ready by saying that we are, above all, called to bear fruit. But what kind?

The church in Galatia, in the early years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, was trying to figure out what it meant to be church together and how they could tell when they were on the right track. They had all the ingredients of church life... maybe with an extra topping of divisions and conflicts. So the Apostle Paul writes to them, and invites them to look for the fruits of their life to see if they are living in the Spirit. A word of warning, he starts with a bad list... but he will get to the good...

SERMON

This weekend was the 88th Annual Meeting of the Maine Conference, United Church of Christ. (It's actually the 212th anniversary of something called the Maine Missionary Society.) For a lot longer than 88 years, actually, this group of churches has been gathering to listen for where God was calling them. You, as it turns out, have a big part of that... since my arrival here coincides with my becoming chair of its Board of Directors and its Moderator. So, I will confess, I am tired today... but I am also strengthened by the prayers that I have received from many in the last week, and some I even received while I was at the podium.

In our common ministry and history of the church, you will probably hear the word discernment an awful lot. I have a clergy colleague who is also a neighbor of mine who I ran into yesterday, who kind of snorted when I said it and said, “Discernment is what the church says when it kicks a can down the road.” Sometimes the jokes sting a little bit on the way down.

Nonetheless, discernment is, I think, the right word for what shifts when we stop trying to make the right decision for what we want, and listen for what God wants for us... It takes a profound reordering of our thought processes, or communal processes if we are working with a committee or a team.

You will probably not hear it all too often around the office, or in your house, or on the news. We live in a world of “deciders,” not discerners. Some things, should be simply decided, but some require a different kind of listening and process.

So it was for the early church. The church in Galatia was really up a tree with each other. There were huge fights about who had the right way forward, the right holy bonafides... and fights just because why not more fights.

So Paul asks them to examine their fruit... to see what their ministry was bearing out.

This can be hazardous.

In life, I think too often we are accosted by measures of fruitfulness that seem wildly distinct from these words to the church: the fruits of the Spirit are **not** success, popularity, wealth, attention, easy living, #bestlife, or anything else down that line. Yet, indeed, there are churches and traditions of our faith which proscribe to a form of prosperity gospel that asserts you can measure God’s presence in your life by the number in your bank account, the vacation that you last went on, and

I think most of us are not that egregious, I would venture to say, but it is always tempting. When we experience various good things in life, it is tempting to associate it with some sign that we are on the right track... maybe even with a sign of God’s blessing. These are the things that we notice easily, life getting a little better for us maybe... but others?

But we know the problem with this right? The fancy word is *theodicy*, and you can just read the whole book of Job: Life will find a way to correct you in this theological frame, because as it turns out good things happen to bad people, and worse, bad things happen to good people *all the time*.

I like a much improved version of this theory: “Every time something bad happens to me, I don’t ask the question, ‘Why did it happen to me?’ The question I ask is, ‘Why did it happen for me?’” - Elijah Cummings

“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”^[1]

Instead of looking for some sense of reward in the stuff of our life we are called to listen deeply for what grows out of our living as individuals, and as communities:

This week, 725 people got fed, but even more 200 people fed them in our community. If we listen deeply to that fact, there’s fruit that is born out: there was joy... there was patience and gentleness, there was gratitude... maybe the self control mainly applied to the gravy, but, you get the idea.

One last thing... a warning about measuring before the right season:

It is wonderful to have Kelly here to speak about *My Sister’s Keeper* today, because they remind us that when we are looking and listening for signs of fruitfulness, we do not determine the season: there is always the chance for new life, new fruitfulness, new joy, new peace, new patience in each of our lives and in the lives of others... so we all owe each other the opportunity to enter into new seasons that may give more life than the ones that came before.

I’ll say agin what I like to say a lot... it matters a great deal where you stop telling a story... if you do, you can turn almost anything into a nightmare. There is, in fact, a way to tell the Jesus story that stops on Good Friday...that ends with betrayal and death. But the amazing thing about Jesus’s story is that it asserts that the holiness which created us doesn’t let silly things like book covers, or empires, or even death be the end of the story.

Maybe today you need to hear it, maybe today we need to be challenged to tell others what *My Sister’s Keeper* knows: no one is defined by the worst chapter in their story. Indeed, God seems to like a challenge, seems to look for ways to take them to new heights... so much so that death became life. So much so that we have all been invited to be continually renewed and challenged to bear out more fruit in the Spirit: more love, more joy, more peace, more patience, more kindness, generosity.

Listen to your life, listen to our life... and may we follow in the ways of God that bear good fruit for all.

1. Buechner, Frederick. *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* ↩