

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

We have before us today the parable of the Barren Fig Tree. I think it's safe to say that most of us here know this parable because it is a very well-known parable. But in this parable's familiarity, its meaning and the outcomes are just a familiar in our assumptions about them. In other words, we hear this parable and quickly assume that Jesus is telling us to bear fruit or be cut down...get right with God or be cut down or condemned. Is Jesus really saying bear fruit or be cut down? What does bearing fruit really mean and what is the fruit we are to bear?

Some might assume that through our faith we bear fruit...but what is the fruit of our faith and who makes the judgment of what is fruit and what is not fruit? Or, what is good fruit and what is bad fruit? Keep in mind that a fig tree bears fruit twice a year and the fruit in the winter is not edible when compared to the good fruit in the summer. Do we then bear fruit out of fear of being cut down? Do we bear fruit to save ourselves, or do we bear fruit out of love for God?

Well like anything these days that we need the answers to, I turned to Google and of course, you know everything that is anything is found on the internet and it is all absolutely, one hundred percent true. So, I googled "what is fruit of faith?" Here is what I found:

The fruit of faith is the way a person lives out their faith through trust, love, and good deeds. It can also refer to the positive outcomes of faith, such as joy, peace, and hope.

But who is the judge of good deeds that I assume are good? Do we bear fruit to simply serve ourselves? Do we bear fruit that bears a positive outcome for *ME* and brings *ME* joy, peace, and hope? What is the fruit we bear for the glory of God?

Within the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew we hear illustrations of the practical meaning of the different messages of Jesus about fruit. We hear Jesus say this:

<sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will know them by their fruits. <sup>21</sup> 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?"' <sup>23</sup> Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." (Matthew 7:18-23)

What I hear Jesus saying here in Matthew and what Jesus is saying to us today in our appointed Gospel lesson is this...you may assume that your faith is bearing good fruit, and you may assume that it is all being done in God's name...but only God will truly know the fruit of our faith by the very tree we are.

My point here today concerning this parable is this: I believe when we focus on the fruit that *WE* bear, we are missing the bigger picture because we are simply bearing fruit that is reflective of ourselves and not of God. Also, we may bear fruit that in our assumption is in the Lord's name, that it is righteous, correct, and good but in the bigger picture it may be considered hateful and devastating to others.

Abel Meeropol, born in 1903 to Ukrainian-Jewish parents in the Bronx was an American songwriter and poet whose works were published under his pseudonym Lewis Allan. He wrote the poem and musical setting of “Strange Fruit” in 1937, which was recorded by one of the most haunting voices in jazz music, Billie Holiday. By the time Ms. Holiday was performing this song, it was very controversial and she was prohibited many times from performing it...needless to say, she performed it anyway. This song is a dark and profound song centered around the lynching of African Americans in the Southern United States during the Jim Crow Era. The ominous lyric portrays Black victims as fruit that hangs from a tree. When we talk about a good tree unable to bear bad fruit, or a bad tree bearing good fruit, listen to the words of this song and imagine the God-fearing society that did many things in the Lord’s name that bore the fruit of the laws that enabled this to happen. The lyrics are this:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Later, in 1963, after years of this so-called “law-biding” hatred established through Jim Crow laws, someone rallied people together to peacefully stand up and march in protest against the injustice in Birmingham Alabama. However, eight white prominent clergy called Martin Luther King Jr’s actions, “unwise and untimely,” and this protest landed King in a Birmingham City Jail where King wrote the famous words, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” in his letter to the white clergy.<sup>1</sup> This letter has become known as, *Letter From Birmingham City Jail*. The fruit of the Jim Crow law was seen as good and right to the white clergy at that time and in their minds some would say they were bearing “good fruit,” but were they?

In that same letter that King wrote from that jail cell, he quoted T.S. Eliot, who said that there is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason.<sup>2</sup> There is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason...how many trees have we cut down because they have not exhibited or produced the fruit we like or deem as good?

Here is the problem with a parable that is familiar...we then assume so much about it. But our assumptions are in a legalistic sense, do this or that or else...if you don’t bear fruit you’re out, you’re cut down. But here is the problem with our legalistic assumptions about this parable, it

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<sup>1</sup> Washington, James W.. *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*. New York: Harper Collins, 1986. From the forward and the “Letter from Birmingham City Jail, pages 289-302.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid page 301

becomes about us...and our conclusions and judgments and NOT about God's grace and mercy. In our assumptions about this parable, we miss the fact that the parable also has no outcome, there is no ending to the parable. Look closer at the parable, we don't know if the tree produced fruit nor do we know that the tree was cut down. We don't even know if the tree gets one more year.

Our Gospel lesson today begins with an incident in which Pilate slaughtered a group of Galileans with the result that their blood mingled with that of their sacrifices. And this catastrophe along with the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam (*sea-low-um*) fell on them sets us up to assume that God causes suffering if we are bad or that sin causes calamity...bear good fruit or face the threat of being cut off. If this is so, then God causes everything and, in this sense, there is no room for human freedom in human order. Jesus is using this parable to expose such a fallacy or to dispel our legalistic assumptions about good and bad fruit and cutting down or doing away with the things we make hateful and bitter assumptions about. But the opening of our lesson along with the open-ended parable about the barren fig tree make the point that life is uncertain and that death is capricious, rather death is given over to sudden and uncertain changes of mood and behavior. If we die by the sword of violence, by accident, by natural disasters, or by disease or natural causes it is not because God has arbitrarily chosen to punish us for our sins while sparing others...but if we assume this, then we are attempting to bear fruit to save ourselves and we miss the most gracious fact in the parable when the caretaker says, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, and I will care for it...". Here is our Good News today. While it may be difficult to see, it may not be when our focus is taken away from what *WE DO* and placed on what God IS doing in this parable.

Karl Barth the brilliant Swiss Reformed theologian said that our faith in God does not give us answers to our questions, rather our faith in God gives us more questions about God and faith. Herein lies the beauty of the parables that Jesus uses to teach us about our faith. Our faith is going to constantly challenge us and chase our souls around the room in wonder, but this is the constancy of "repentance"...in that very challenge is the need to constantly seek out God to better understand, to be turning constantly toward God because of our constant need of God. It is recognizing our own sin, our own constant need of grace, and recognizing that same need of grace in others and in turn, *being* that same grace that truly nurtures a fruitless tree instead of just simply cutting it down in our judgment.

Today the entire Gospel lesson shows us just how fragile and unpredictable life is and can be. So, in that fragility we turn to God and we see that right now, in our assumptions about this graceless and fruitless age, we are living in a time of pure grace and divine forbearance. Saint Paul reminded the Romans of this in his letter to them, when he wrote:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. <sup>2</sup> You say, 'We know that God's judgement on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.' <sup>3</sup> Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgement of God? <sup>4</sup> Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:1-4)

I asked earlier in this sermon, what is the fruit we bear for the glory of God? The fruit, the good fruit we bear for God is our repentance, our turning from ourselves to God's grace and mercy that

feeds and nurtures us all in Word and in Sacrament. Through the means of these vessels of grace, may we recognize that we are “inheritors of (God’s) glorious kingdom” not because of who we are but rather because of who God is and how God works through Jesus Christ *and through us*...recognizing that we are incorporated into the history of salvation, making that history our own history...we are the continuation of God’s mighty acts of love and of grace...that nurtures others and not just cuts them down.

God’s grace finds its expression in our lives...even when it seems as though our faith is fruitless, even when our towers crumble and fall God grace, God’s mercy, and most of all, God’s salvation given to us will never be fruitless. The Good News for us this day...is that the caretaker pleaded and we are not cut down...in the mercy of God, we are abundantly pardoned through Jesus Christ who makes a fruitless tree called a cross bear much fruit by hanging upon it...giving us all another chance.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*