

“Bearing Fruit”

A Sermon by James J. Rawls

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Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Trinity Episcopal Church, Sonoma, California

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Some of you may recall a much beloved off-Broadway musical called “The Fantastiks.” It premiered back in 1960 and ran for more than 17,000 performances over the next 42 years; thereby becoming the world’s longest running musical. The story involves two neighboring fathers, Hucklebee and Bellomy, who connive to get their teenage offspring to fall in love. At one point the Dads sing a duet in which they share their frustrations over the vagaries of child-rearing and long for the more predictable world of gardening:

Plant a carrot,
Get a carrot,
Not a Brussels sprout.
That's why I love vegetables.
You know what you're about!

There’s an obvious truth here that we all can recognize, even if we sophisticates in the wine country might prefer lyrics a bit more viticultural:

Plant a pinot,
Get a pinot,
Not a chardonnay....

Whatever the crop, the truth is fundamental, encoded on the DNA of each living thing. And it’s helpful, I think, to keep that natural, universal truth in mind as we consider the scriptures we’ve heard this morning.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah is a ballad of social criticism, laced with barbs aimed at the status quo in Israel of the 8th century B.C. The ballad tells of a vineyardist who thought he was planting “choice vines,” expecting them to yield premium grapes. Yet something went terribly wrong, and somehow those vines ended up producing “wild grapes” (or, according to other translations, “bitter fruit” or “stinking fruit.”) The integrity of the vines somehow had been corrupted or compromised and their fruit stank. The planter of the vines responds by planning their destruction.

Isaiah then makes plain the meaning of his song. It’s the Lord God Jehovah who is the vineyardist, and the people of Israel are the vines. The Lord had offered Israel the gift of God’s redeeming love, expecting them to respond by receiving that love and bearing the fruits of justice and righteousness. Yet that hadn’t happened. The Lord “expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” The people bore fruits of injustice and unrighteousness, unmistakable evidence that the gift of God’s love had not been nourished in the souls of the people after all.

The Psalmist carries this idea forward, making explicit what fruits God favors and those that God abhors. The favored fruits all have to do with reaching out to those who are marginalized, defending those who are oppressed: “Save the weak and the orphan,” says the Lord, “defend the humble and needy; Rescue the weak and the poor; deliver them from the power of the wicked.” If we truly have received by faith the grace of God’s love in our hearts, we can do nothing less; for inevitably, naturally the fruit of God’s love is the love we bear to others.

In our reading from Hebrews, the writer catalogues the mighty and heroic deeds of faithful women and men throughout the history of Israel. These national heroes accomplished great things, we’re told, not by their own power but through faith. They had opened themselves by faith to God’s grace and had borne much good fruit. But the writer also reminds us of those who suffered because of their faithfulness: “They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they...[were] destitute, persecuted, tormented.” Most likely the reference here is to martyrs during the so-called Maccabean Revolt of the 2nd century B.C. when thousands of the faithful were slaughtered in an insurgency against Syrian oppression. Their faithfulness led them to challenge the status quo, to become dissidents, and to suffer the consequences of being enemies of the state; their eventual victory is recalled still in the annual festival of Hanukkah.

Our passage from Hebrews concludes with a mighty “therefore”—a powerful paragraph in which this great cloud of faithful witnesses points us toward the one who is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” And he, like those martyrs persecuted in earlier generations, suffered because of his faithfulness, “enduring the cross” so that he might take his seat “at the right hand of the throne of God.” Surely it is he who is the most faithful and, thereby, the most fruitful of all humankind.

So it is that we come, at last, to Jesus and to his words which we heard this morning in our reading from the Gospel according to St Luke. The words are harsh; they’re troubling. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” asks an exasperated Jesus. “No, I tell you, but rather division!” This is not “Jesus meek and mild;” this is Jesus under stress.

I think the key to understanding this difficult passage is the same we’ve applied to each of the other readings this morning: namely, the bearing of fruit. The sayings of Jesus are full of agricultural metaphors—of sowing and seeds, crops and weeds, vines and vineyards. Most famously he uses an image from viticulture to reveal his own identity and to define his relationship to those who place their faith in him: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) St Paul in his letter to the Galatians also speaks of bearing fruit as the clear, unmistakable sign that God’s grace has truly been received by faith and dwells within: “[T]he fruit of the Spirit,” writes Paul, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Gal 5:22)

It is this very fruit, however, that brings division and conflict into the life of those who are faithful. Ours is a world (is it not?) marred by the opposites—by hatred, war,

impatience, greed, faithlessness, and self-indulgence. If we bear the fruit of the Spirit, we inevitably find ourselves in radical disharmony with much that is in conventional culture. Jesus is impatient for us to understand this; to realize that such conflict is natural, unavoidable. Using other images from the natural world, he compares the coming of conflicts to the falling of rain when moisture-rich clouds blow in from the west or to the dawning of a scorcher of a day when Santa Ana winds blow in from the east.

Jesus warns of the divisions to come, just as the writer of Hebrews reminded us of the martyrs of the past. Jesus knows that his followers, like the prophets of old, will be “destitute, persecuted, tormented.” And, indeed, the blood of the martyrs begins to flow in the first century with the stoning of Stephen and continues for the next two millennia. A powerful testament of that ongoing conflict greets visitors to London’s Westminster Abbey. Newly installed over the great west door are statues of ten twentieth-century Christian martyrs. At the center is the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Baptist preacher assassinated by a white supremacist in Memphis in 1968; to his right side stands Archbishop Óscar Romero, the Roman Catholic priest slain by a government death squad in El Salvador in 1980; and next to him is someone the Rev. Susan quoted last week, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis at Flossenburg Concentration Camp in 1945. Each was filled with the love of God; each richly, abundantly, extravagantly bore the fruit of the Spirit.

Before his arrest and imprisonment, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote eloquently of such matters as grace and faith, fruits and discipleship. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, he speaks eternal truths. He tells us that God’s love for us is a gift, grace, freely offered. Once accepted through faith, our lives are transformed. We become disciples and bear godly fruit. And therein lies Bonhoeffer’s main point. Although God’s grace is a gift; it’s a costly gift, not cheap. Cheap grace, he says, is grace without discipleship, without bearing fruit. Costly grace, on the other hand, demands a response from us; a seeking, and a receiving, and a lifetime of faithfulness. **“Costly grace,”** he writes, **“is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.... It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.”**

The gift of God’s love—the grace of God—is on offer to us all. If we accept that gift through faith—if we allow that holy seed to be planted within us—then we shall bear godly fruit just as surely as pinot vines bear pinot grapes and not chardonnay. A life of faithfulness, however, may bring division and conflict into our lives, just as it did for Jesus and for the faithful down through the ages. Yet receiving God’s grace and bearing that fruit make all the difference...in this world and the next. So it is we pray, **“Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”**