

7.21.2024 Trinity 8 (Matthew 7:15-21)

In his Gospel account, St. Luke records this parable spoken by Jesus: *“A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, ‘Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?’ But he answered and said to him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down’”* (Luke 13:6-9).

In our part of the world, there are a multitude of reasons to plant a tree. We might plant a tree for shade, decoration, privacy, wildlife habitat, to prevent soil erosion, or to absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen into the atmosphere, but in the ancient near east, where our Lord told this parable, the one and only reason for a person to plant a tree in their vineyard was to receive the fruit it produced. In that time and place, the beautiful appearance of a tree, or the cool shade it provided on a hot summer day, counted for nothing, or according to this parable, less than nothing, because a tree that produced no fruit simply used up valuable ground. Like a farmer in our day plows the soil and sows good seed for the sole purpose of producing a crop on his land, in first century Israel a tree was planted for fruit, and such a tree must bear fruit or it is useless, and even wasteful.

The idea that a fruit tree would be judged by the fruit it produces is logical, easy to understand, and it’s a truth applied to our lives not only in this parable, but in other Scriptures as well. In a familiar passage, when Jesus was speaking to His disciples about the importance of abiding in Him in order to bear fruit for the kingdom of God, He said to them, *“I am the True Vine, and my Father is the keeper of the vineyard. He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, and every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes to make it even more fruitful”* (John 15:1-2). In another passage, as our Lord traveled to Jerusalem from Bethany, He cursed a fig tree when He found no figs on it. This curse was a symbol of the judgement falling upon the nation of Israel for being spiritually unfruitful, and this cursed fig tree should be seen as a warning to us, and anyone who professes to love God, but shows no evidence of the good fruit that comes from such a relationship.

The Gospel passage we read this morning provides us with yet another example of judgement based on the fruit produced in our lives. Today we heard our Lord's warning about "*false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.*" Jesus said, "*Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.*" Our Lord's words about the way good trees naturally produce good fruit are then applied directly to us, and to all people, with this statement: "*Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven*" (Matthew 7:15-21).

Jesus conveys the message here that an empty, outward profession of knowing Him is not enough. Instead, we must truly know Him, be intimately known by Him, and like a fruit tree planted in a vineyard, we must bear the good fruit that naturally and necessarily springs from such a personal relationship. Every passage we've considered points to this truth that God does not plant trees for decoration, shade, or privacy, He plants trees in His vineyard to bear fruit for His kingdom, good fruit for His sake and for the eternal benefit of the world He gave the life of His Son to save. Therefore, as chosen trees planted by our Lord, we continually pray for the grace necessary to show forth His praise "not only with our lips," not merely with some religious profession of *Lord, Lord*, but instead, our prayer is that we would show forth His praise "in our lives, by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days..."

To live a life that glorifies our Lord, to go and bear good fruit for the kingdom of God is a high call, and therefore I encourage you to remember what Jesus said to His disciples, "*You did not choose Me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will remain...*" (John 15:16). It wasn't the fig tree that chose to be planted in the vineyard. It was the owner of the vineyard who chose the fig tree and had it planted there. Likewise, we did not choose God, God chose us and planted us here, and the good fruit we bear, the meaningful work we do that glorifies Him and furthers His kingdom, springs from us as naturally as a fig springs from a fig

tree, because the good fruit we bear is the very product of our new nature as sons and daughters of God.

Consider the question Jesus asked, “*Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?*” (Matthew 7:16). The obvious answer is no, because it’s not the nature of thornbushes or thistles to produce grapes or figs, and it is not our nature, as sons and daughters of God, as “*a new creation in Christ*” (2 Corinthians 5:17), to bear anything but good fruit for the Owner of the vineyard. St. Paul, in our Epistle this morning, confirmed that truth about our new nature. Writing to Christians, he told us that those who “*are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ...*” (Romans 8:14-17). To put it simply, in, with, and through Christ, God is our Father, we are His children, and the old saying about nature is true: The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

The passages we considered this morning present us with a simple lesson: *Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit.* Sons and daughters of God, by their very nature, are good trees, good trees planted in the fertile soil of His vineyard, good trees chosen and appointed by Him to *go and bear fruit - fruit that will remain*; and we can be certain that God is patiently returning year, after year, after year seeking such fruit from this tree. By His grace may He find fruit here, the fruit that springs naturally and necessarily from the children of God - children who abide their Father’s love.