

10/18/2009

Bearing Excellent Fruit

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This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace. You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ's faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf. He has told us about the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you.

So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.

The last several weeks, Pastor Doug has been sharing with us about five practices that are common to fruitful congregations – and by fruitful congregations we mean churches that are impacting and changing lives for the Kingdom of God. We've talked about the importance of the practices Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk Taking Mission and Service, and next week Doug will be sharing about the fifth practice: Extravagant Generosity. But today, I want to talk with you a bit about why being fruitfulness is so important, that we might pursue fruitfulness in both our own individual lives and as a congregation.

Here in Colossians, we see Paul talk about how the gospel is bearing fruit among the Colossians and that lives are being changed through the power of God as the church seeks to serve and follow God. But this is hardly the only place that the Bible talks an awful lot about fruit.

In the Old Testament, Israel is often compared to a vine that is called upon to bear fruit for God. Jesus repeatedly uses fruit as an image in his teaching, both stating that people, like plants, are known by their fruit, as well as placing emphasis on the need of individuals to bear fruit. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we see repeated references to fruit, both as the evidence and as the result of God's work in the lives of people. But why is fruit used so repeatedly as an image in the Bible? Why not vegetables (maybe even God doesn't eat them)? Or even snack food or desserts? Why fruit? So let's begin by talking a bit about fruit.

Personally, I love fruit. I love a good apple, particularly honey crisps, as well as fresh pineapple, a sweet juicy clementine, and all sorts of berries, particularly strawberries – especially if they are covered in chocolate. My two-year old son Brennan loves mangoes – but only if they are good mangoes. Another fruit might be your favorite, but for a moment I want you to do something with me:

Close your eyes and imagine a piece of your favorite fruit. Maybe an apple, or a strawberry, or some sort of melon, or even some sort of citrus. Can you see it? Now imagine taking a bite and tasting it. What is it that makes it taste so good? What is it about fruit that makes it so desirable? A good piece of fruit has the right texture, not too firm – not too soft. It has the right color, not too light, not too dark, just perfectly ripe. It has the right scent, hinting at its flavor, and not smelling fermented or totally lacking in smell. Most of all, its flavor is perfect – it isn't bland and isn't weak tasting, it isn't too tart or too sweet, it's all just right.

Good fruit makes us want more of it. We're not satisfied with one bite. It's the sort of taste experience we want to continue to have. Not all fruit is good fruit though, some of it is just average or even mediocre, sort of bland, like the off-season strawberries a person might buy in January. We might eat it if we have too, but we find ourselves wishing it was better. Still other fruit is just plain bad, it doesn't taste right, the texture is wrong, or it just doesn't look or smell right. If we dare to take a bite, we certainly aren't about to eat any more of it.

Fruit is an excellent metaphor for spiritual life because fruit doesn't grow because of what a tree or plant does, it is produced as a result of what the plant is – what the plant, tree, bush, or vine is in its very nature. So as a metaphor for spiritual life, the fruit we produce is evidence of the kinds of people that we are on the inside, evidence of what the Holy Spirit is doing inside us.

One thing that the Bible is clear about is that God is very interested in good fruit – and by fruit we mean the product of people's lives and actions. Some produce good fruit, others produce not so good fruit and in Matthew 7, Jesus tells us that we can distinguish false teachers from those who are his followers,

“You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. So every

*tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.*¹

Jesus tells us that one way we can distinguish his followers from those who don't follow him is by their fruit, just like we don't find oranges growing on apple trees, pineapples growing on grapevines, or cantaloupes growing on blueberry bushes, we won't find good fruit being produced by someone who is leading others away from Christ, or bad fruit being produced by one who is seeking to follow Jesus.

So if God is looking for good fruit, what does this good fruit look like? How do we recognize it when we see it? In Galatians 5, Paul gives us a contrast between the quality of fruit that the world grows with the fruits that the Holy Spirit grows in the lives of Jesus-followers:

"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

*But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!"*²

The presence of these fruits provides a glimpse of the nature of people, because as Jesus said, we can know a tree by its fruit. The presence of the Fruit of the Spirit also provides evidence of a changed life, the kind of life-changes that Paul says he has heard is happening in Colossae.

If the fruit we produce exhibits the kinds of people we are, how the Holy Spirit produces the fruit God desires in our lives is an important question. Robert Roberts, writes "The fruits of the Holy Spirit are, it seems to me, largely fruits of sustained interaction with God. Just as a child picks up traits more or less simply by dwelling in the presence of her parent, so the Christian develops tenderheartedness, compassion, humility, forgiveness, joy, and hope through "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit"--that is, by dwelling in the presence of God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son. And this means, to a very large extent, living in a community of serious believers."³

¹ Matthew 7:16-20

² Galatians 5:20-23

³ Robert C. Roberts in *The Reformed Journal* (Feb. 1987). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, no. 10

We find this idea present in John 15, which Mary read for us, here Jesus tells us that God is the gardener and that Jesus is the grapevine, and that we are the branches that grow off the grapevine. God is constantly pruning and shaping the branches that fruit might grow more and more. Just as branches that are not connected to the vine cannot grow fruit, people cannot grow the kind of fruit that God desires unless they are connected to Jesus. Jesus tells us that those who abide in him, that those who remain in him, that stay connected to him (and as such they are also connected to each other by all being connected to Jesus) will bear much fruit.

And like Robert Roberts points out, this connection to other serious believers is important in producing these fruits because together as a community we can spur each other onward. We can encourage and correct each other. We can help each other to continue to abide in Christ both in good times and bad, both in seasons that are easy as well as seasons that are difficult.

If you examine the panels that cover our organ speakers here in the sanctuary, you'll notice that each of them is surrounded with a border of grapevines bearing bunches of fruit serves to remind us that Jesus is the vine, we are the branches - connected both to Jesus and to each other, and that we must rely on Jesus to bear fruit.

This is where the five practices we've been talking about the last several weeks come in. Engaging as a community in acts of radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity help us to grow in our faith and produce fruit not only as a community but also as individuals as we ourselves experience life change and come to produce and exhibit more and more of the fruit of the spirit.

Robert Schnase, the author of [Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations](#), writes on his blog: “. . . Vines, branches, seedtime, harvest, soils, vineyards, trees, fruits—the Bible is replete with stories that lift high the notion that God expects us to use what we have received to make a positive difference in the world around us. Fruitfulness points us toward the result, the impact, and the outcome of our work for God's purposes and saves us from merely congratulating ourselves on our efforts, our hard work, or our inputs. . . .”⁴

⁴ www.fivepractices.org blog entry “143. Pruning”

This raises a point of caution. If we lose sight of the result, the impact, and the outcome of our work for God's purposes, it is possible then for people to be hospitable, to participate in worship, to participate in discipleship classes, serve in ministry, and give of their money and their time without producing the kinds of fruit that God desires. It is possible to focus only on what we believe we ought to do. It is possible to do these things, to perform these actions without our heart being engaged.

In 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, Paul addresses this situation. As he goes through chapter 12 lays out a whole list of gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to believers for use in ministry and talks about how the church as a whole makes up one body, but as he closes the chapter Paul makes a point to say that there is "a most excellent way" or "a way of life that is best of all."

He then begins chapter 13 with words that we might find rather familiar:

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

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Or maybe we might paraphrase, if I say hello, and shake hands with every person I meet, if I attend worship, close my eyes during prayers, and move my lips during the songs, if I study my bible, and serve as part of a ministry team, if I put some money in the offering plate each Sunday, but don't do it out of love for others, it profits me nothing – and doesn't produce the good fruit that God desires.

What Paul is trying to tell us is that God doesn't desire that we simply do these things, but that we do them because our lives are beginning to overflow with love, and that love becomes our motivation. That we don't do things because we ought to do them, but we do them because we want to do them. We do them because we have experienced the love of God and that love flows out of us as a response to what God has done for us.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:1-4

Love for God and love for others is the very heart of the gospel. When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment in the law is, he responds “Love God and love people.”

In the verses immediately following the scripture that Mary read for us from John 15 where Jesus tells us to abide and remain connected to him that we might produce fruit, Jesus continues:

This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other.

When it comes right down to it, all five practices are not simply things that we ought to do, but rather expressions of love – a love that lays down its life for others. Radical hospitality is simply demonstrating love for our neighbors by loving and caring for them. Passionate worship flows out of love for God and an appreciation for what God has done. Intentional faith development grows out a desire to develop a deeper relationship with the God who has loved us. Risk taking mission and service express love through servanthood that is willing to go out on a limb for others. Extravagant generosity is a loving reflection of the loving generosity that God has poured out upon us.

If we really think about it, we can boil down all five of these practices, we can boil down all of God's commandments, the entirety of what we are to do and who God desires us to be to one word, one practice, one attitude: Love.

Love God, love people. This is what makes for excellent fruit - The kind of fruit that God desires - The kind of fruit that people can't get enough of: Love.

When we examine the earliest days of the church in the book of Acts, we find at least as much as the miracles that the apostles perform, the thing that is drawing people into the community of faith is the love that Christians have for each other, going so far that we are told that there are no needy people among them.

If we go back to our scripture from Colossians 1, we note that the thing that has convinced Paul that the fruit of the Gospel is evident in Colossae and that lives are truly being changed there is the fact that the Holy Spirit is filling them with love for others. The presence of love is evidence of changed lives.

This has certainly been our experience here at BBC. Many people in our church family, in fact in this room were drawn to this church because of the love that they experienced as they interacted with others from BBC. Many people in our church family have had their lives changed and transformed by the love they have experienced here. The Holy Spirit is producing fruit among us as we have interacted with God and each other as we have abided together in Christ.

It is my prayer as we continue to contemplate these five practices together that we would become more and more willing and able to allow God's love to flow out of us – that our hospitality would become more radical, that our worship would become more passionate and heartfelt, that we would become even more intentional in our pursuit of Jesus, that we would take even more risks in mission and in service, and that our generosity would become even more extravagant.

And that we would do these things, not out of a sense of duty, or out of a feeling that we ought to do them, but rather because we want to, because our hearts are so full of the love of God that it would overflow more and more, so that lives might be changed and transformed and we might produce the good, delicious fruit that God desires in abundance as together we abide in Christ.