

Fruit-Producing People

At a low-country church, on a Saturday morning, a group of us had gathered outside to work on a prayer garden. Someone noticed a nearby tree—just the perfect size and shape for a child to climb. Luke, who was about five at the time, was up that tree in a skinny minute. He had fun that morning.

Lots of kids like to climb trees. When I was a kid, that was one of my favorite things to do. On Turkey Run Road, the road we lived on, there was a fine old apple tree—one of the best climbing trees in the whole neighborhood. The tree seemed really big, but maybe that was just because I was little. I loved being way up there amid its friendly branches, surveying the world from a higher vantage point than I could on foot or on my bike. In the apple tree, I could think long thoughts and dream the wonder-filled dreams of childhood.

But the thing about that tree was, it had no other apple trees anywhere near it. There was no opportunity for cross-pollination. So I never saw any apples on it. It never produced any fruit.

Jesus talks about producing fruit in today's appointed reading from Matthew's Gospel. Once again, the action takes place in a vineyard. During our time together the past two Sundays, we've been reading and reflecting on Jesus' stories about vineyards. Today we read a third: one that must have been considered central to Jesus' message, because it's one of only a very few parables included in three of the four gospels.

It's Jesus' last vineyard story. He tells it in the temple, as a response to religious authorities who have confronted him during the final days of his ministry. And when those leaders heard this story, they would have immediately been reminded of Isaiah's song of the vineyard, which you heard a few minutes ago.

In the vision of Isaiah, the Lord of the vineyard has labored long in its preparation. Has dug and cleared. Has planted and built. From this vineyard, from God's people Israel, God was expecting a great harvest of sweet, juicy, luscious fruit. But that vineyard yielded only wild and bitter grapes.

In the gospel, Jesus' parable starts out pretty much the same way. The vineyard owner plants and fences and digs and builds. Creates a *beautiful* vineyard. Then he leases the property to tenant

farmers, who in return are expected to pay the “rent.” That is, to provide the owner with his grapes. To produce fruit.

But that’s when things start to go downhill. When the owner sends first one group of servants—and then a second group—to collect the crop, they’re met with violence and brutality. And when the owner sends his own son, those tenants kill him.

Now you’ve probably already figured out that in this story, the characters and the vineyard itself have symbolic significance. Deeper meanings.

That’s how it is in Jesus’ parables, which have been called “narrative time-bombs,” simple stories that “steal [their way] into people’s hearts.”

“But at some...point,” Scott Hoezee says, “the ‘Ah-ha’ moment [arrives] as the real meaning of the story suddenly explodes in people’s minds... ‘Oh my!’ people would exclaim, ‘we thought he was talking about farmers and crops but he was really talking about us and God!’”

Just as he is in this vineyard parable. The owner represents God, who creates the vineyard—the faith community—and later sends God’s servants—the prophets—to gather fruit produced by the tenants. But the prophets are persecuted and even killed.

Finally, the vineyard owner sends his Son, whom the tenants—in hopes of possessing and controlling the vineyard themselves—take outside the vineyard and murder. This Son is, of course, Jesus himself.

Who then asks the religious leaders: *What will the owner do to those tenants?* And the chief priests and Pharisees reply, *they're done for. They're history. That owner's going to entrust the vineyard to farmhands who'll give him the fruit at harvest time.*

The temple authorities don't realize until it's too late that Jesus is talking about them. *They* are the greedy tenants in his story. They have just pronounced judgment upon themselves.

And we hear Jesus telling them that *the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.*

This story of tenants is a cautionary tale, don't you think? Jesus' words are for first-century faith leaders. But aren't they also for twenty-first century believers? Don't some wonder if just being a part of the church isn't enough, without also having to be fruitful?

Actually, it's not enough. Not according to Jesus. He calls us to be fruit-producing people. Being fruit-producing people is God's intention and God's will for you and me.

But—you might be thinking—this fruit, these works, don't save us. We know that we're saved by faith. But if faith is genuine, it results in the desire and the ability to produce fruit. Fruitfulness can't help but spring naturally from faith in the Owner of the vineyard.

We're here in this vineyard—in this church—for a reason. That reason is the church's mission. It's why we do everything we do. But sometimes we get so involved in *what* we're doing that we forget *why* we're *doing* it. We get so caught up in the *means* that we forget about the end. The outcome. The objective.

That objective is our mission as United Methodist Christians. You know what it is. Our mission “is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Pastor Andy Bryan shares his experience of “preaching [one Sunday] on God's mission...And how, when we lose sight of that mission and start focusing on other things, we lose our connection to God and become just another social organization among many.

[In his sermon, Pastor Andy invites his congregation to respond to

this question:] ‘If someone came up to you this week and asked you *why does your church exist*, what would you say?’ The responses were slow to start off but...then, in a quiet but confident ten-year-old voice from the middle of the room, [the answer came]. ‘To change the world.’ Whispers could be heard as the grown-ups asked one another who had brought...a burst of Holy Spirit-inspired truth.”

The church exists to change a broken world in desperate need of healing. Andy Bryan’s story appears in a marvelous little volume entitled *Bearing Fruit*, by Lovett Weems and Tom Berlin. In this book, they remind us of our need to be intentional about living into our identity as fruit-producing people. Everything we do in the church needs to connect back to our mission—to our church’s reason for existence. The church doesn’t just *have* a mission. The church *is* mission!

To help keep us centered on the mission, Weems and Berlin suggest that we connect our various ministries to the church’s mission with two powerful little words: *so that*. We’re doing *this so that that* will happen. *So that* statements are sprinkled through sacred Scripture. *So that* statements ground our ministries in a rationale higher and holier than the words *because we’ve always*

done it this way. So that statements help us remember *why* we offer a particular ministry in a particular way. Developing *so that* statements keeps us mindful of the outcome toward which we're working, as God's people, the church. We're working as people with a mission. We're working as people with a purpose. And that purpose is producing fruit.

You and I are tenants of the vineyard. The church. This vineyard—this church—doesn't belong to us. And its ultimate destiny isn't up to us. Our task is not to be in control. We're only tenants, to whom the vineyard has been leased in order to produce a good crop. Our task is to be not only faithful, but fruitful.

To seek justice for the last and the least. To bring the lost to Christ. To offer works of mercy. Deeds of kindness. Acts of grace. To be instruments of compassion. To feed and to clothe. To care and to comfort. To walk in the ways of righteousness. To live in such a way that others will be able to see the light and love of God in us. To live so that others will draw closer to that light and love. And draw closer to its Source.

These are the fruits that God desires and expects from you and me. God in Christ Jesus loves us enough to hold us accountable. One day, you and I will be required to give an

accounting for what we have done in this vineyard, this foretaste of a heavenly kingdom.

God's kingdom will be given to people who produce fruit. To those chief priests and Pharisees, it must have sounded like a threat. To you and me, it's a promise, a promise filled with hope. We hear it today, this promise of Jesus.

Jesus. God's own Son. Jesus, who was seized and taken out of the vineyard, outside the gates of the faith community. Jesus, who was crucified. Jesus, the Son who was sent by the vineyard Owner.

The One to whom the vineyard belongs.

The One to whom the church belongs.

The One to whom the eternal kingdom belongs.

The One to whom you and I belong.

The One to whom belong every gift and talent that have been entrusted to you and me, so that we may joyfully join in the work of producing fruit. So that we may joyfully join in offering a great harvest of sweet, juicy, luscious fruit to our God, the One to whom it all belongs.

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