

“Before the Fruit”

Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:5-8; John 15: 4-11

Rev. Katie Murchison Ross

Grace Presbyterian Church, 2/17/19

They say there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe there are two kinds of people, and those who don't.

I can safely say that I am among those who don't. The world is so gray. I've seen enemies become friends. I've seen illiterate people make the wisest observations. I've come to know incarcerated folks who show the greatest love and moral standing.

It appears, though, that the psalmist and the prophet Jeremiah and maybe even Jesus all think the world falls into a simple dichotomy. According to them, there are two kinds of people. Wicked and righteous. Cursed and blessed. Those who bear fruit and those who don't. There is one kind of person who gets comfortable in the way of the wicked, who trusts in mere mortals, who tries to flourish apart from Christ. Then there's the other kind of person, who delights in God's law, trusts in God, and abides in the love of Christ. This is not a Venn diagram. There is no overlap.

Can it really be so simple?

The dichotomy makes me nervous for many reasons, one of which is that if I'm honest, I'm not sure where I fall. I delight in the law of the Lord, sometimes, like when I discover some new and liberating way of understanding the Scripture. But at other times I just sort of carry my Bible around in my bag and hope for meditation by osmosis. I *think* I trust God—but I also like to have my back up plan and my worst-case-scenario plan and my to do lists. I try to live and abide in the love of Jesus—but when Jesus is too slow, I take matters into my own hands. Is that trusting in mere mortals? Is that trying to live apart from the vine?

Yes, I'm a little nervous about this easy division between the happy and the wicked, the blessed and the cursed. It's Psalm 1 that makes me the most nervous. Because the happy one, the blessed one, is described as someone who meditates on the law of the Lord, the teaching of the Lord, the word of the Lord, DAY AND NIGHT. This is completely impractical. I don't know about you, but I do not have time to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night. I have exactly 9,422 things on my to do list. Good things! Ways of bearing fruit!

This is not something I am making up out of selfish ambition. *My pastor told me that I am supposed to bear fruit.* Remember a couple weeks ago, we talked about the fruits of the spirit, and in the children's sermon we learned that an avocado is a fruit? And Pastor Ben encouraged us to start bringing our communities back from the brink, with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness... That means I have neighbors to get to know. I have acts of kindness to dream up and implement. I have mission trips to support. I've flowers to plant and books to read. I have long overdue thank you notes for the people who gave us baby presents and helped us move and invited us to dinner. And with the craziness that has happened in February alone, don't even get me started on the calls I need to make to my elected leaders in Virginia and just across the river there in the district, to advocate for common sense and common decency.

So...sorry, Mr. Psalmist. I just do not have time to meditate on the law of the Lord during the day. And don't get me started on night. As far as meditating goes, maybe I can carve out a few minutes for a quick devotion here and there, or a reflective walk. Maybe, if I'm lucky.

And yet, Mr. Psalmist—and Mr. Jeremiah too—I have to admit that I cannot get your image out of my mind. This image of a tree, planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, which doesn't fear or get anxious when the heat comes, which doesn't wither. I want to touch that refreshing stream, drink its living water. I want to draw from it energy and hope. I want the work I am doing in the world to feel *not* like a slog of 9,422 things, not like pressure, but like a natural outgrowth of who I am. I want to be so connected to God, the source of life, that bearing fruit is, as Jesus says, an experience of complete joy.

This non-anxious dwelling in God, this joyful living in love, represents something pretty different from my normal experience of using my own effort in the midst of a parched landscape to manufacture something that looks like fruit. And maybe that's really the point of the stark contrast here. Not that there actually are only two kinds of people, not that each of us is either wicked or righteous. But that God wants us to see what a difference there is, between the life we have, and the *life* we could have. When we are disconnected from God, the source of life, our strength withers away, especially in times of drought. When we are connected to God, the source of life, we can be fruitful and joyous even in adversity. Because we know that we dwell and abide and walk in love, and that love renews us. Because we rely not on our own abilities, but on the grace that flows through us all.

What does it take to be this kind of person, the tree planted by streams of living water, the one who abides in Christ and feels refreshing waters of love flowing through them? The one who understands that *before the fruit*, there needs to be a well of life to draw from?

Well first of all, Jeremiah tells us, it takes placing our trust in the Lord. Which means, it takes letting go of control. When I am the one working hard to manufacture fruit, I can decide what good deeds I will do, and when. But when I'm starting with the roots, I have no idea what radical new things God may do through me. I start by attending to God. I also have no idea when God will bring me into a place where I can see fruit. And this is frustrating. I imagine many of you, like me, are used to using your education and your skills and your resources, to *make fruit happen*. It takes a shift to stop and pray and root ourselves in God and be open to the surprise that may come as we deepen.

And how do we deepen? As the psalmist says, by delighting in the law of the Lord, and meditating on God's word. Christian tradition has long explored and encouraged the development of spiritual practices—habits that connect us to God's lifegiving power, so that we may go into the world and bear fruit. These habits include prayer, Bible study, worship.

Now, maybe some of you are jumping out of your seat with excitement and affirmation, because you are the type who delight in the law of the Lord. But maybe to some others, by mentioning this simple triad of prayer, Bible study, and worship I've just lost you. Are you picturing another thing to add to the to-do list, a slog through the book of Numbers, another rote recitation of

litanies you're having trouble focusing on? Have we moved so easily from a compelling vision of life and fruitfulness, to such staid practices?

So let's dwell on spiritual practices for a moment. First, in my very imperfect experience, these practices become easier, more joyful, more lifegiving with time. It's like any exercise. When you first start to practice the piano, it takes some effort, it takes developing the facility in your fingers and slowly going through the music. When you first start to swim or run, you endure a few weeks of feeling very out of breath and pained and slow. Over time, though, these exercises can become a joy. You start to get beyond the notes on the page, beyond your tangled fingers, and hear music. You start to get beyond each labored breath, feel the wind, see the trees, develop a rhythm. So it is with the Bible. The living word changes you, molds you, enlivens you. It becomes a joy.

And during different seasons of our lives, spiritual practice can look a whole lot of different ways. Maybe you read a chapter of the Bible every morning, or kneel at your bed each evening to pray before you sleep. But if that just doesn't work, God is way too big to be limited—God can be encountered in so many places. (Now, it's not *anything* goes. Our Scriptures today remind us that it's the word of God, and Christ the living Word, that connect us to the living God. If nature walks or meditations simply return us to the echo chambers of our own minds and hearts, we aren't connecting to the source. We miss out on God's rich nourishment.) But sometimes it's not more knowledge or commentary we need to hear this lifegiving word. Sometimes we need a space to clear our heads from everything else, and help us to recall the words of life. Jesus went not only into the temple but also out into the hills to commune with God. God can be encountered on a morning bike ride, through a devotional app, a time of singing on your drive, a simple prayer said repeatedly throughout the day: "God, be near to me."

Whatever it looks like, we need to forge a deep connection to the source of life before the fruit of loving service and justice can erupt in our lives. The root system is crucial for trees to grow. I learned recently that much of tree roots' growth is based on tiny "root hairs" that elongate from the roots and expand into the soil, searching for water and nutrients. Every single little root hair grabs a soil particle and all together they attach themselves to so many soil particles that they are firmly planted, able to withstand erosion and rain, able to grow into a strong, fruitful existence.¹ So if it feels like you have a long way to go to being the one who meditates day and night, a long way to being able to withstand the drought and the heat of life, a long way to being a lush, green, living tree that's full of fruit, that's okay. Each little habit, each little root hair, helps us collect just a little more nourishment, grow just a little closer to that ever-flowing stream.

And furthermore, we're not alone—we flourish most in community. We help each other to pray and sing and study and hope. So, apparently, do trees. Forgive me one more ecology lesson, because this one is fascinating: scientist Suzanne Simard has become famous for her groundbreaking work on communication among tree roots.² Yes, the root systems of trees are

¹ Steve Nix, "How a Tree Grows and Develops," *Thought Co.*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.thoughtco.com/hardwood-trees-and-how-they-grow-1343506>.

² Diane Toomey, "Exploring How and Why Trees 'Talk' With Each Other," *Yale Environment* 360, September 2016, https://e360.yale.edu/features/exploring_how_and_why_trees_talk_to_each_other.

entangled with one another, and help each other out. When a birch tree is getting more sun in the summer, it will send nutrients through the root system to the fir trees that are shaded; in the fall when the birch tree loses its leaves, the fir tree sends nutrients back to it. I think this is so beautiful. If we, people of faith, are trees planted by streams of water, there are times where we lose our connection, where our faith wavers, or our prayer life falters. In those times we need to depend on others to pass along the lifegiving words of God, to give us strength and hope.

These spiritual practices, these personal and communal ways of connecting to God, are not just ends in themselves. They enable us to bear fruit, to do all the 9,422 good deeds we want to do in the world. Singing and worshipping together, for example, was a practice that sustained the Civil Rights movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott grew out of Rosa Parks' own deep rootedness, years of spiritual development and training in nonviolent resistance. And when it erupted, it required much from the black residents of Montgomery, Alabama. They spent *over a year* boycotting the buses. That meant that for over a year, they had to walk, or find carpools or taxis or other means of getting to work. For over a year, their leaders suffered lawsuits and harassment. For over a year, they waited and stood firm through drought and heat, not yet seeing fruit. And, in the evenings, they gathered in Holt Street Baptist Church to worship, to sing, to pray, to remember the source of their strength. Some said that this singing was "the soul of the movement." And one of the songs they sang? *We shall not be moved; we shall not be moved. Like a tree planted by the water, we shall not be moved.*

That's what it can look like when spiritual practice bears fruit.

Maybe we feel that all of this is beyond us, that only the extraordinary people—only the superhero saints of times past—have the power and spiritual depth to lead boycotts that change the course of American history.

But let's remember that there are no extraordinary people. There are, *in a sense*, only two kinds of people. Those who try to muscle through on their own and get burned out, withered, depleted. And those who are rooted deeply in God, the source of life.