

Fruitfulness

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Date: 14 May 2023

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[0 : 01] All right, well, good morning to you. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector here at Church of the Advent. Big day in the life of our church. First of all, obviously Mother's Day, so congratulations, and we're thankful for all of you who are moms in all of the ways that we have mothers, spiritual moms, and as God has knit us together into one great family, our hope is that each child here has a lot of different kinds of moms loving them and pouring into their lives.

It's also a big day in the life of our church. Maybe the biggest day since we started the church 15 years ago because we're having a shortened service because immediately after the service, we're going to be having a special members meeting, and we're going to be holding a vote of the membership on whether or not to move forward with signing a purchase and sell agreement and to empower the vestry to basically do the due diligence and potentially secure a permanent home for Church of the Advent.

And so this is a major, major milestone in the life of our church, and been praying about it for years and very excited to be here on this day. I think any time you have a major milestone like this as a church, it's really important to pause, to take stock, and to remember why we're here and what all this is about.

And in God's providence, the gospel reading from the lectionary is John chapter 15. It's a fantastic passage to lead us through a kind of pausing and reminding ourselves why we're here.

In other words, here's the question we want to ask this morning. What does it mean to be a successful church? What does it mean to be a successful church? What should we be aiming at as a church? A lot of people, when I meet people out in D.C. at various things and they find out I'm a pastor, the first question they ask is, well, how big is your church?

[2 : 00] And the reason is because a lot of people define success in terms of numbers. What's your average Sunday attendance? What's the size of your budget? Are you a successful church? There's a whole other side to that, though.

There are people who sort of react against that and they say, we shouldn't care about the numbers. We shouldn't care about the metrics. Who cares? Even if five people go to my church, it's about faithfulness.

It's about having the right theology. And if I have the right theology and we're faithful to that theology, even if it's just me and my family, we're a faithful church. We're a successful church. If you look at Scripture, Scripture gives us one, I would say, one single clear metric for success in terms of being a church community.

And it's neither the numbers nor is it having the right theology, although those both matter in their own way. It's fruitfulness. Are we fruitful as a community?

Now, if you're a Christian, you've heard that word a lot, bearing fruit, being fruitful. But chances are maybe we don't fully understand exactly what that means or why it matters so much, why Jesus would emphasize it so much here.

[3 : 11] If you're not a Christian, it probably sounds kind of bizarre to talk about fruitfulness. It sounds like a medical condition. It sounds like an odd thing to talk about. But when we talk about fruitfulness, what we're actually talking about is the fact that Christianity offers a relationship with God that is profoundly intimate.

It actually says there's a kind of relationship that's possible with God that no other religion would claim possible. And so whether we're Christian, non-Christian, whether you're a member of this church and you're here to vote, or this is your first time walking through the door, John 15 has something to say.

So let's pray, and then we're going to look at fruitfulness. We're going to ask three questions. Where does fruitfulness come from? What does it mean? And then how do we get it? How do I become more fruitful in my life? How do you become more fruitful in your life?

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for, in particular, this passage. We thank you that on a day like today, with the weighty decision that lays before us, Lord, we thank you that your word is here to guide us.

May we always be rooted in your word. May it always be a lamp unto our feet and light the way, Lord. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, where does fruitfulness come from?

[4 : 32] Let me just set the scene for you right now in John 15. Jesus has just shared with his disciples the Last Supper. Judas Iscariot has been revealed as the betrayer.

He's gone away to get the authorities. Jesus has washed the feet of his disciples. He's implied to them that a lot of hardship is about to come, that he's going to go away.

And at this point, you can imagine his disciples are feeling a great deal of distress. And then Jesus stands up, and without a word, he leads them out into the night air, and they begin to wind their way through the streets of Jerusalem.

And as they're walking through the streets of Jerusalem, they would have passed the great temple. They would have looked up at the entryway to the temple, and they would have seen a great golden vine draped across the entrance to the temple.

It's a powerful symbol, that golden vine. In the Old Testament, God referred to Israel as his vine. God was the vine dresser, and he planted Israel as his vine to bear fruit in the world.

[5 : 42] In other words, to bring God's blessing to all the nations. So they would have gone past the temple. They would have gone out of the city, and then they turned toward the Kidron Valley on a path that leads ultimately up to the Mount of Olives.

Along the way, they would have been passing through rows and rows of ancient vineyards, ancient grapevines. And you can imagine them in the night air, walking quietly, single file between these rows of grapevines.

And then Jesus stops at one point, and he takes one of the small, delicate branches in his hand. And at this time of year, if you looked closely, you would just begin to see the first signs of the new spring growth.

And you can imagine him taking this little branch, and all the disciples stopping and waiting to see what he's going to say. And he turns to them, and he says, I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser, and you are the branches.

Now, what's he saying? On the one hand, he's saying Israel is no longer the vine. At one point, Israel was the vine, but they failed.

[6 : 58] Instead of being a light to the nations, they became like the nations. But he's saying a lot more than that. When Jesus says, I'm the true vine, what he's saying is that he has come to do what Israel failed to do.

He has come to bring God's blessing to the nations. He's come to bring light and life. He's come so that all the nations might come to know and worship God who made them.

And then he goes on in verses 4 and 5 to say, He intends to bear this fruit of God's blessing, but he intends to do that through his followers, through us, through his disciples.

But in order for us to bear fruit, we have to be in relationship with him. And then he says very radically, apart from me, you can do nothing. You can do nothing.

Now, most of us read this passage at a casual glance. We hear the phrase bearing fruit, and we think of good works, doing good things for God in the world. God wants us to do good for him.

[8 : 05] So why would Jesus then say, apart from me, you can do nothing? Does that mean that I can't go out and do good works? What he's really saying here is that not all good works are the same.

Not all good works are the same. When I was a kid, I remember one time being with my mom at a furniture store. My brother and I were there. We hadn't eaten. We were starving. One of my great memories of my entire childhood is that I was always hungry.

And that's actually still true. But in my childhood, I remember being hungry, and it was taking forever. And I looked over on this table, and there was this bowl. And in the bowl was the most beautiful grapes I'd ever seen.

Beautiful grapes. And so the next chance I got when my mom was looking the other direction, I bolted over to the table. I reached up with both hands. I grabbed the bowl, and I grabbed the grapes, and I realized they're plastic.

Plastic grapes, complete with little beads of morning dew on them that were made out of God knows what, but they were plastic. And I was so disappointed.

[9:10] See, in the eyes of the world, all good works look the same. Right? Good works are good works. But in God's eyes, there's a massive difference. Trying to please God with good works, thinking, well, all God cares about is the outcome.

Doesn't really matter what we believe. God just wants the work to get done. And that makes God happy. That's kind of like trying to pass off plastic grapes as the real thing.

The kind of fruit that Jesus is talking about cannot be manufactured. It can only be grown out of relationship with him. In other words, fruitfulness is not about morality.

This is not simply about morality. What delights God is that the fruit is the fruit of a relationship. It's about spiritual life flowing from Jesus through us into the world.

That, by definition, is what fruit really is. So the point here, the first point is this. If we want to bear fruit in the world that pleases God, you have to be connected to the vine.

[10:22] You have to be in intimate relationship with Jesus. So this is the answer to our first question. Spiritual fruit comes from relationship with Jesus. That's the key to spiritual life and growth.

It's union with Christ. But what exactly do we mean by fruitfulness? What does this spiritual life look like as it flows into the world? Well, in general, we could say that fruit in the Bible refers to the entire life and ministry of people who follow Jesus and experience his presence in their lives through the Spirit.

It's the entire life and ministry of people who follow Jesus. But there are actually various places in Scripture that get more specific about fruit. Galatians 5.22, for example, talks about fruit as Christian maturity.

Right? So the Spirit produces love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. So that is a kind of fruit. Colossians 1.6 talks about fruit as the ability to discern and obey God's will.

So that's a form of fruit. Hebrews 13 describes fruit as Christ-exalting worship. That's also a kind of fruit.

[11:49] Romans 1.13 talks about fruit in the form of personal conversions. Bearing fruit means that people are coming to know Christ and coming into saving relationship with him.

If we look back in Isaiah chapter 5 verse 7, fruit means justice for the oppressed. It means justice and righteousness.

A right relationship with God compelling us to put right relationships in the world. Right? So all of these are ways that the Bible talks about fruit and bearing fruit.

In other words, y'all, these are the things that God values. These are the things that God cares about. These are the qualities that he wants to see in us as individuals and as a community.

And remember, this isn't just about self-improvement. God's desire is to bless the nations through his people. God's desire is to bless the nations through this fruit.

[12:54] In other words, it's about putting God's character on display for the world to see. It's about living lives that provoke questions only the gospel can answer. So we've talked about where fruitfulness comes from and we've talked about what it means.

What does all of this mean for us? In other words, how do we get this in our lives? And this passage shows us that we need three things to happen in order for us to be a fruitful community.

Number one, we need to be cleaned. We need to be cleaned. He says in verse 3, already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

In a vineyard, this is, again, a vineyard metaphor here. In a vineyard, some branches, particularly younger branches, they tend to droop down. And when they droop down and they lay on the ground as they grow, they start to get covered in mud and mildew.

And when those branches get covered in mud and mildew, they can't produce any fruit. And so vinedressers regularly have to lift the branches up. They have to clean them off.

[14:02] And then they have to support them so that they can bear fruit. And this is the image that Jesus is using. What this means, in other words, is that some of us are here as Christians, but

there's no fruit in our lives.

You heard that list that I read earlier. And you're thinking about your own life, and you're thinking, actually, I'm not seeing a whole lot of fruit. And so Jesus is saying, if this is the case, the first thing you need to ask is, am I stuck in the mire, in the mildew of some kind of unrepentant sin?

Right? Is there an area of my life, are there areas of my life where I'm stuck in unrepentant sin? Or are there relationships in my life that are broken, that need to be repaired, and there needs to be reconciliation?

Are there things that are keeping me from bearing fruit that need to be addressed? Do I need to repent and be cleansed by the grace of Jesus? Do I need to be lifted up to a place where I can grow in Him?

Do I need to be cleaned? Do I need to be cleaned? Right? And the word that Jesus spoke refers to the gospel. You know, the Christian life is an ongoing life of repentance, where we come back again and again to the truth of the gospel, resting in God's grace, asking Him to lift us out of the mire.

[15 : 21] That's all of the Christian life. It's not just once. We have to do it again and again and again in order to bear fruit. That's the first thing. We need to be cleaned. Number two, we need to be pruned.

Now, what does it mean to be pruned? He says, and every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. And the thing about vines is vine dressers have to prune branches constantly.

They have to prune constantly. And what pruning really means is cutting away all of the extra growth so that all the nutrients go directly into the grapes. You have all this kind of growth coming out, and they're clipping away everything that's not fruit so that all of the energy gets focused in on producing the fruit.

It's maximizing the efficiency and the ability of the branches to produce the fruit. So this is talking about Christians who are bearing fruit, and God works in our lives to increase that fruit.

So God comes into our lives, and He cuts out things. Sometimes He removes things that are a waste of our time, a waste of our energy, things that are distracting us from what God is doing in and through us.

[16 : 40] Right? So maybe you're the kind of person who prides yourself on being competent. You're always one of the smartest people in the room. You're the go-to, most reliable person.

When people think of you, they think, that's an ace right there. Everybody wants you on their team. And then you make a huge mistake at work. And it's very embarrassing because normally you're the competent person, but you make a huge mistake.

And you ask, well, how would God let this kind of thing happen to me? Well, maybe God is pruning you. Maybe God is saying, hey, there's a lot of fruit here, but you spend a whole lot of time and energy focusing on making sure you appear competent.

And I'm going to prune that away. I'm going to break that. I'm going to break you of this. I'm going to begin to teach you how to rely on me because imagine the kind of fruit that you could produce if you didn't spend so much time and energy worrying about what other people thought of you.

Imagine if I could set you free to rest in my delight and approval of you. Then imagine the kind of fruit that would be possible in your life. He's pruning you. Or maybe you're dating somebody for a long time and you broke up and you've just been stuck on pining away for this person.

[17 : 54] You stalk them online. You're constantly wondering where they are and what they're up to. And you can't get them out of your mind. And then you find out that they've been engaged to somebody else.

And you just feel that crushing feeling of it's over. God, why would you let this happen? Maybe God is pruning you. Maybe God is saying, you're spending so much time and energy focusing on this. And I need to prune this. I need to remove this out of your life so that you will become open to what I do have for you over here. But this needs to be cut out of your life before you're going to be open to that.

He's pruning you. So pruning is often painful. A lot of times when things are happening and we're looking at God and we're saying, why did you let this happen? A lot of times it's because God is pruning us.

He's calling us to confront things, idols, things that are sucking our time and energy away from his purposes. So the more a branch bears fruit, the more aggressively it must be pruned.

[18 : 58] God is taking things out of your life. But the reason is because he's working to produce more abundantly through your life. You're a branch on his vine.

So we need to be cleaned. We need to be pruned. Lastly, all through this passage, there's this phrase that's repeated again and again and again. Abide.

Jesus says we need to abide in him. So what does it mean to abide in Christ? And if we look at this passage, he defines it in a couple of ways. In verse 7, he says that abiding in him means abiding in his word.

Abiding in his word. There's a big difference between reading the Bible for a bit of inspiration, reading the Bible as part of a Bible reading plan.

There's a big difference between that kind of Bible reading, although those things are fine. But what Jesus is talking about is really allowing God's word to abide in you.

[20 : 00] That requires study. It requires reading and meditating on it regularly. It means carrying around in your mind and heart in your daily life. Carrying it around so that it shapes the way you pray.

That's one of the reasons that we use the prayer book in our private devotions as well as to order our worship here on Sundays. The prayer book, the entire purpose of the prayer book is to take Scripture and to format it in such a way that we can pray it and speak it individually and collectively. So that we can saturate ourselves with it. So that we can abide in it and have it abide in us. Right? So it means carrying God's word around so that it shapes your prayers.

So that when you're struggling, say, with anger and resentment towards someone, and you're so mad at this person, and you're so filled with a sense of injustice at what they did and what you think that you're owed.

And then all of a sudden, Paul's words in Ephesians 3 come to you. And you recall Paul saying to Christians, let all bitterness and wrath and anger be put away.

[21 : 07] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another. Why? Why should I do that? As God in Christ forgave you.

And in that moment, the word is abiding in you. And you're remembering, however angry I am at this person, I've offended God ten times more, a hundred times more.

And yet God has forgiven me, and yet I can't forgive this person. Right? The word is abiding in you at that point. Or when people are panicking because the stock market is plummeting and retirement accounts are evaporating, and everybody's like, what are we going to do?

And look at inflation. And you recall Jesus saying, don't be anxious about your life. Look at the birds. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. How much more is he going to take care of you? And those words begin to speak into your anxiety, and you begin to feel your anxiety level slowly coming down.

[22 : 14] The word is abiding in you at that time. This is what Jesus means. Jesus means that we are taking the word in. We're studying it. We're internalizing it so that we can preach to ourselves throughout the day.

So that we can constantly come back to it again and again and again. So that's the first thing.

Abiding in Jesus means abiding in his word. The second thing, and really the last point this morning is this, verse 9.

Abiding in Jesus means abiding in his love. The fact that we are talking about bearing fruit makes this last point extremely important.

Because when we talk about being a fruitful community or fruitful individuals, this could very easily become performative. And what I mean by that is that we can start to think that what makes someone a Christian is all the fruit.

The more fruit you have, the better Christian you are. Look at all that person does for God. What a great Christian. And, you know, in a tongue-in-cheek way, all the time we say, oh, she's such a better Christian than I am.

[23 : 22] Those people are such better Christians than I am. Maybe we don't say it, but maybe sometimes we think, I'm so much of a better Christian than that person is. I can't believe they call themselves a Christian.

I'm a real Christian. And when we begin to think that way, our fruitfulness is becoming performative. And that's a huge mistake. Because the thing that makes Christianity unique in all the world is this fact.

That fruit is evidence of spiritual life and growth, but fruit is not what makes someone a Christian. Fruit is not the thing that makes you a Christian. It's evidence that you're a Christian.

But that's not the thing that makes you a Christian. In other words, that's not the thing that has secured God's love for you. When you come to God and when you ask to be forgiven, when you ask to be cleansed through his word, and when you ask that because of what Jesus has done for you on the cross, at that very moment, at that very moment, all of your sin is taken away.

The righteousness of Christ is wrapped around you, is given to you. And at that moment, you become adopted as one of God's beloved children.

[24 : 43] What that means is that at that moment, God loves you as much as he has loved the greatest saints throughout all of history.

It means that at that moment, God loves you as much as he loves his own son. It means that at that moment, God loves you as much as he will ever love you in your whole life as much as he has ever loved anyone.

He will never love you more or less than he loves you at this moment. And what that means is that abiding in the love of Christ guards us against feelings of both superiority and inferiority.

Because no amount of fruitfulness will ever make God love you more than he loves you right now.

And no amount of fruitlessness will ever make God love you less than he loves you right now.

So when we talk about bearing fruit, there can be this temptation to compare ourselves. And that's not the point here. The point is that as we abide in the love of Christ, when you love somebody, you want what they want.

[25 : 54] You care about what they care about. And the more we abide in his love and the more we rest in that, the less we're focusing on what other people are doing and keeping pace with them.

The more we are focusing on God's delight in fruit.

And what that creates in me is that I desire to produce fruit because I want to delight him. Because I want to make him happy because I love him. Because that's what you do when you love somebody. So I want to take all of this and apply it with a couple of minutes we have left. How do we know that we are spiritually alive and growing?

How do we know, you know, if you want to kind of do a checkup on yourself, how do you know that you're spiritually alive and growing? Well, think about physical fitness.

How do we measure physical fitness? You can see somebody walking down the street and they're wearing their athleisure wear. And they have nice running shoes and a fancy water bottle and earbuds in.

[26 : 58] And they can look like they just went for a run. But we all know better. They probably didn't. Right? Because we all love to wear that stuff. Right? So you can look at that.

And maybe you can assume that person is in good shape and maybe they exercise all the time. But you don't know. Right? That's not a reliable measure. They could just be trying to look the part and spend a lot of money on their tights.

How do you know somebody is in shape? Well, you measure things like cardiovascular endurance, muscle strength, body composition. These are accurate measures of fitness that you can't really fake.

In the same way, it's easy to gauge spiritual fitness by the things that are readily observable. Right? But spiritual fitness isn't about what books you've read.

Or what Bible verses you can quote by heart. Or how good your theology is. Or even the emotional experiences that you've had in your life. The question that we need to ask ourselves is, is there fruit in my life?

[28 : 07] Is there fruit in our community? When it comes to the spiritual fitness of a church, it's not about the size. It's not about the production value of Sunday services.

It's not about the programs. It's not about whether or not you have a building. Is there fruit? Is there fruit? And the closer we get to buying a building, the more we need to keep this question in front of us.

You want to know why? Because D.C. is full of beautiful church buildings. That at some point along the way, they cut themselves off from the vine. So they're no longer bearing fruit.

And so they're no longer churches. They're museums. They're mausoleums. A building can greatly enhance our desire to be fruitful.

It can greatly enhance our ability to bear fruit in D.C. It can be a place of spirit-filled, Christ-exalting worship. It can be a place where we teach and we preach God's word.

[29 : 18] It can be a place where we cultivate godly character in ourselves and our children. It can be a place where we seek to reach the lost with the gospel. It can be a place where we do the work of justice and mercy in the community.

It can be all of those things. But only if we remember the truth of this passage. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. And apart from him, we can bear no fruit.

Lord, we can do nothing. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your abiding in us. Lord, that even the invitation to abide in you is merely a response to what you have already done.

That you are the God who abides with your people. We thank you that we have your word and that we have your love. Lord, we thank you that in some great unfathomable mystery that you desire to bear fruit in the world through people like us.

What an honor. Lord, it's almost unthinkable. And yet that's our desire and prayer, Lord.

[30 : 33] Lord, that you would do your work in and through us. In our individual lives and in this community. Lord, we pray that we would delight you and glorify you.

By being a fruitful community in D.C. That your blessing would reach across this city. Lord, that people would come to know you. We pray this in your son's holy name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.