

“God’s Green Thumb” (by Theo Scott, guest preacher) – Sunday, August 9, 2009

About three years ago, there appeared 14 perfect holes in the yard next door to me. A day or two later, my Bosnian neighbor plants 14 twigs, and I say to myself “what in the world?” So I say to my neighbor, who has very few English words, “What’s it going to be?” And he says, “Fruit trees.” And I say, “Oh.” So, for three years, I have watched the twigs, I have seen branches and leaves appear, I have seen them grow taller, I have seen them grow stronger. Some have floundered, only to regain their strength. None of them has died, and I watch him watch them. And I watched as he erected some elaborate structure behind all of these trees. Then he strung wires on the structure, and I said to myself, “what now?” Well, I say to him “What’s it gonna be?” And he says, “gwrapes”. And I say “Oh.” One year later, this “structure” is covered with leaves. I can hardly wait for all of this fruit from my neighbor’s green thumb.

So he has vines, and he has branches....and so do you and I. We have the true vine to which we are permanently connected. The Lord has spoken in John 15:5:

I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man abide in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

You are probably like me. I’m not here to do nothing. When he said in Jeremiah 29:11 that he had a plan for me, I believed him. I do not for a moment think that it was to do "nothing." So I need to be about the business of the “something” I’m supposed to do, with a little help from “God’s Green Thumb.”

According to the scripture, if there are branches on the vine that are not bearing fruit, they are cut off. The other branches are pruned, and bring forth fruit even more abundantly. It’s a God-thing. I want him pruning my fruit, don’t you? You see the vine and the branches are interdependent. So we need God, the vine, but God also needs us, the branches. I know we say God doesn’t need anybody. Oh yes he does, and He has always known it. This is why He went about selecting disciples. This is why He had prophets and apostles. Just like us, He, too, needed somebody to lean on. We are His chosen, we are also His disciples...and believe me, He wants to grow us through the Holy Spirit.

And so, we learn from John, that we are to bear fruit, and Paul helps us along. Because if we take a little journey to Galatians, he tells us how to live our lives fruitfully. He tells us about the fruit of the Spirit. And might I note that fruit is singular, not plural, so it’s a package deal. Think about a still-life painting of a bowl of fruit. Try removing a piece of fruit, and the painting is incomplete. Similarly, if we lack any of the spiritual fruit, our lives are incomplete. So we are always at work to use the fruit in our lives, it is not automatic. Paul writes in Galatians 5:22:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Sounds like Paul was making out a shopping list. So let’s just jolly over to Harris Teeter and order up a bag of joy, a couple of pieces of patience, a bunch of goodness, and a bushel of faithfulness. Fact is, they’re not for sale.....you’ve got to bring your own fruit.

Biblical scholar, Wesley Gehrig, suggests that the “possibility is that the fruit of the Spirit is actually one, love, with the other virtues being different manifestations of love in operation.” Sounds philosophical, but on a practical level, so much has been written about love. Love is a word that flows easily from our tongues. There is much direction to us about how we should love God, our fellowman, ourselves.

From the commandments:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God....

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.....

And look to Corinthians, specifically 1 Corinthians 13: *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.*

We might look to Mother Theresa, a favorite person of mine. She said, “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.”

So what about joy? Can we also find joy while we do small things with great love? I think so, because I believe in my heart that the small things we do with great love come from within, and that is where joy resides. We spend a lot of time talking about being happy, and if you ask someone what it will take to make them happy, much of the time you get external answers. ...money, cars, careers. If we go within to find our joy, we will have internal answers, and more importantly, we will have eternal answers.

And what about peace? We look to words like contentment, solace, comfort, quietness. We get so wound up with what’s going on in the world and in our lives, we feel peace is hard to achieve. But we need to look to our Everlasting Father, who, in his grace and mercy, gives it to us. It is a gift....ours for the taking. He paid the price for us. He has given us His peace, and he has made

it abundantly clear that this is not a peace that the world giveth. And, we should not let the world take it away. Our job is to grow these fruit and use them to His glory. He is the vine, we are the branches.

We are interdependent, but we can never forget that he is the “great one.” He looks to us to be good. The Psalmist says, and we recite, “goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” Have you done something lately that was “good?” Take a few seconds and think about that. Anything come to mind? I certainly hope so, because we all do things that are inherently good. Remember, good does not have to be huge. As Mother Teresa said, “we can do small things with great love.”

Some writers use generosity as the word for “goodness” when discussing the fruit of the Spirit. What about the man who, wanting to move his mother nearer to him moved her and 4 elderly friends out of state and into a 5-bedroom house. He made personal arrangements for them, and he promised the friends they would always have a home even if his mother preceded them in death. You may have seen the story in “The Good Stuff” section of the News and Record. Sometimes “goodness” goes to even larger degrees. Mr. and Mrs. Stanford had huge wealth, but they also had sorrow, because their son had died at age 15. They said, “The children of California shall be our children.” They chose to use some of their wealth to help young people fulfill their educational purpose, thus establishing Stanford University. They were hugely generous with the gifts they were given. They turned a sorrowful experience into something good and kind.

As you heard in the scripture reading, in addition to love being kind, Paul said in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, “Love is patient.” Personally, this one’s tough for me. Patience challenges me more than any of the other fruit of the Spirit. It’s just not my strong suit. We can look to the lessons of Job, the faithful servant who trusted the Lord. I’m not going to say he did not have some doubts....I’m not going to say he didn’t have questions, but he was willing to wait. We worry a lot about time. Patience takes time. Patience implies waiting. But patience as a fruit of the Spirit is often also represented by Job as longsuffering, frailty of body as well as losses of family and wealth. I think also about Julian of Norwich who wanted to suffer as Christ suffered. Julian, a 14th century nun, felt that such intense suffering was the only way to God. Her intent on waiting on God took her to the brink of death, only to survive to share the love she found in Christ through suffering. Waiting takes time, and growing takes time. And today we are talking about growing for God. As servants of God, Job grew, Julian grew, and they were both open for the wonderful gifts that followed.

But everyone does not use the fruit. Paul, you may recall, was upset with the people of Corinth because they had gifts, but they didn’t use their spiritual fruit. This frustrated Paul. The Corinthian Christians might have taken lessons in kindness and gentleness from Ronald Cotton.

Ronald Cotton spent 11 years in prison, charged with a rape up the road in Burlington that he did not commit. When cleared by DNA and released from prison, he met his accuser who had been absolutely convinced that he was the perpetrator. She tearfully expressed her regret and how it would haunt her for the rest of her life. He looked at her and simply said “I forgive you.” Her comment later was:

"The minute he forgave me, it's like my heart physically started to heal. And I thought, 'This is what grace and mercy is all about. This is what they teach you in church that none of us ever get.' And here was this man that I had hated. I used to pray every day of my life during those eleven years that he would die. That was my prayer to God. And here was this man who with grace and mercy just forgave me. How wrong I was, and how good he is."

There is a message here for us saints. I like to think of faith as holding on to believing, and faithfulness as demonstrating that in our lives. Even in prison, Ronald Cotton stayed connected to the vine. How connected are you? Just showing up here every Sunday is one way to stay connected, it shows our faithfulness. Don’t ever underestimate the value of worship.

But, I’m going to tell you something.....faithfulness, patience, kindness, love...all of the other fruit, are worth nothing without the one Paul lists last.....self-control. This speaks to our inclinations to do what we do and the feelings we generate when we do what we do. It speaks to whether we show self-discipline in our actions and in our thoughts. Face it; today’s world is highly undisciplined. I am amazed and a little frightened when, at my college, I receive student essays that talk about the temptations out there. More than ever, we disciples need to set Christian examples of self-control. Without self-control, the painting of the fruit of the Spirit can never be complete.

Robert Longman, Jr., a religious writer, states it this way:

“Each person in the Spirit has the fruit differently, and each fruit has a different shape in each person - but all the fruit will show themselves in each Christian as he or she goes deeper into their walk with the Spirit.”

As we walk in the Spirit, may we stay connected to the vine, may we recognize and graciously accept the gifts God has given us. My neighbor has the gift of a green thumb and he uses it masterfully. But we have God’s Green Thumb. And with the faith of my neighbor that he will grow great fruit, may we, too, truly believe in a bountiful harvest.

Thanks be to God.