

Peter Bankson: The Fruit of the Vine is Food for the Gardner

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

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The Fruit of the Vine is Food for the Gardner

Scripture

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells his followers: "As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from God. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask for in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." (John 15:9-17)

Introduction

We are nearing the anniversary of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the believers, empowering them to go out into the world and bear fruit.

Last Sunday during the Children's Word about the vine and the branches, Joan Dodge asked, "Why do you suppose God wants us to bear much fruit?" Andy Holmes answered: "To be food for the gardener." I heard in his answer a profound statement about co-creation and our relationship to God.

What does it mean to bear good fruit, faith fruit, succulent, ripe, varied, tasty fruit – for God?

The Scripture for last week offered a couple of ideas about being fruitful followers of Christ:

- Fruitful branches remain connected to the vine.
- Fruitful branches have been pruned to concentrate their energy.

The lessons for this week adds some other ideas about being fruitful:

- Love one another in the model of Christ. And –
- Serve others, to the point of self-sacrifice.

These Scriptures led me back to our call here at Seekers, and the emphasis we place on self-pruning and service – that is, to the outer journey of service to others and the inner journey of spiritual practice. In our call to be Church, we claim these two elements.

- "Our call is to be a "Seekers community," which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our

lives.

- By "Seekers community," we mean an intentional body that sees Christ as our true-life source. Koinonia with one another and genuine self-giving to the world are the ways we can be in Christ today. ..."

How do we love one another in passionate koinonia? How do we sustain genuine, fruitful self-giving to the world? Moreover, how do we keep ourselves focused on God's call on our lives – pruned for fruitfulness? This is not simple work.

Bill Milliken, the founder of Communities In Schools and my boss there, has lived this koinonia for 40 years. He's come to a very clear understanding that "It's not programs that change people: it's relationships." Since he began as a Young Life urban street worker in Harlem in 1960, he has seen the value of "programs" in bringing people together to create healing relationships. Nevertheless, the power of love within those relationships that leads to fruitfulness.

Thinking about faithfulness and fruitfulness brought back a couple of examples that I would like to share with you.

Bearing Fruit

I remember the years just after World War II when my family lived in the home of my dad's parents in Spokane, Washington. We moved there in the late Fall of 1946, when I was seven years old. The next spring, my dad planted a peach tree in a sunny spot in the back yard. (That was the spring dad helped me start my first unsuccessful business venture, "Peter's Frog Farm," a converted sandbox in the shade across the garden – but that's another story.)

It was a small, young peach tree, about two years old and as many feet tall. He planted it deep, in rich soil. All summer he watered it, picked off the bugs, and kept the soil around it weeded clean. There were no blossoms that year, and I was

disappointed that there were no peaches in the fall. That is when I learned that it takes five years for a young tree to begin bearing fruit. It takes more discipline to grow peaches than carrots.

However, in the fall of 1949, just as we were about to move from Spokane to San Francisco, the tree gave us three peaches! We watched them grow from tiny green marbles into the kind of big, lush peaches that never make it to the Safeway. We hovered and picked off the bugs by hand again, although this time it took a ladder to get to the highest one. When the harvest came, we celebrated with peaches over vanilla ice cream. The last time I saw that tree; it was 32 years old, and full of peaches!

I did not inherit my dad's gardening genes. I have never given myself permission to spend much time in the garden. Moreover, frankly, I have been very slow to develop the discipline I need to be a good pruner. I would rather just let things grow "naturally." "After all," I tell myself, if God had wanted that tree to have fewer branches, it would not have grown so bushy. Here is what I mean.

In the mid-1970s, we moved into a wonderful old house in Leavenworth, Kansas. It was a carpenter's dream, set well back on a large lot, with well-established trees and shrubs. We put in a small garden the first year we were there, and in the process discovered a big old grape vine growing in the hedge!

"Wonderful!" I thought, "This is a mature vine. With any luck, we'll have our own grapes in the fall." Therefore, I put down some fertilizer. I watched as the vine sent out fresh shoots. They were lush and leafy – and I just could not bring myself to prune them back. That summer, the grape vine covered the hedge with huge, healthy leaves. I waited ... hovered quietly ... even picked off a few bugs. In the fall, we had no grapes. That is when the Bible story about pruning the vines to grow even more fruit took on some real meaning for me.

If you have ever grown a garden, you may have some idea what Andy might have meant. If you did not prune your vineyard, I suspect you did not get much to eat.

When it comes to life, this is easier to say than to do. I've come to learn that the spiritual disciplines we encourage are an important foundation for of self-pruning. Nevertheless, it is still hard for me to prune myself.

I can see how bearing good fruit is important to the Gardener of our souls. However, what might it mean to love one another so that we will bear much fruit, fruit that will last?

When I look at the life of Jesus, I see three things that marked his love for those around him. He encouraged them. He served them. In addition, he stayed pruned – focused on his call and grounded in prayer.

The Love of Christ: Encourage, Serve and Stay Pruned

How are these part of our life in this faith community?

Let me start with encouragement. As you know, Marjory injured her knee – seriously – two weeks ago tomorrow. Until we saw the x-rays, I was afraid she had torn something loose in there, and would not be walking for a long time. It was scary and painful. However, she is healing very well, and the doctor says she will be "good as new" in a few weeks.

From the morning of the accident it was clear to me that there was nothing I could do to heal that injury. My role was to be with her when she was in pain, to encourage her, to bring the icepack when she was too sore to walk to the fridge, and as folks around here are saying these days, to "keep praying." Oh, I have done some pruning of my work schedule – a little extra driving, enough trips to Chicken Out to fill a frequent customer card. Nevertheless, the best thing I could offer was

encouragement.

When it comes to my own self-pruning, my response to Marjory's injury is revealing. Her accident has given me another set of "oughts" to set against those from my day job at Communities In Schools. It is easier for me to trade one opportunity to help someone else for another. The deeper challenge for me is how to focus on God's call in the midst of these competing opportunities to be a good scout. The good news for me is that I can see this for what it is: a substitution of one set of external demands for another. I may be waking up, but this is not very deep self-pruning. In the end, I am grateful for the opportunity to hang out with Marjory while she heals, and be as encouraging as I can.

This morning during the Word for the children, the sharing turned to "How does it feel to spend time with a friend?" Andy Holmes talked about feeling like being part of a team. Covey Wilkins talked about the feeling of being "not alone." Yesterday I saw this companionship at work at Carroll Street. We launched a new Seekers Carroll Street team – The Seekers Demolition Team. Six of us spent the morning encouraging each other to dig deeper into the vision of Carroll Street reborn. We started out opening a small hole in the wall between the living room of the old house and the "Circle/dining room" of the commercial building – and ended up exposing most of the common wall between the two buildings. It was exciting to find the old window and door with arched openings. At noon, when we needed to leave, no one wanted to stop. The discovery and dreaming were infectious!

The second part of Jesus' loving way is what we often call the outer journey or mission: Jesus served. He healed, he taught, and he laid down his life for his friends – and that includes all of us who call him our Messiah.

In the Call of Seekers Church we commit ourselves to being a community that "... disperses with a common commitment to

understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives." That means at home, and at work, and in those places where we give our time as volunteers.

Sometimes that means direct service, the kind that gives a hungry person a fish to eat. Sometimes that means teaching someone to fish. Moreover, for many of us, it means the kind of indirect service that changes systems to bring justice and mercy. I think of this service as cleaning up the lake so there will be fish for the future.

At [Communities In Schools](#), I am rebuilding a team to help our growing network stay connected with Congress and the government. It does not give me much opportunity to tutor kids who need help learning to read, but we are slowly cleaning up the lake – community by community, so kids can get the help they need to succeed in school and life. This kind of service is a "cleaning-up-the-lake-so-there-are-fish-to-catch" service, a justice-making service in the tradition of Esther and Daniel. It is the work of an exile people, seeking justice where God has sent them.

It is work that I believe in, but frankly, I am tired. There are days when I would rather be somewhere else – like going to my studio to make stuff.

These days I wonder whether it is ever OK to stop doing a good work helping others, to stop before I am too sick to work – or dead. I know that this is the end stage of a cycle of call, and that I need to be listening even more attentively now. However, I am so **busy**! Which gets me back to my need for more of the self-pruning practices of the inner journey: silence, prayer, meditation.

Conclusion

Jesus says: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask for in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

That promise is Good News to me as I look forward to Pentecost this year. I can see the three legs of Jesus' love stool: encouragement, service and self-discipline.

- It is my dad planting that peach tree, watering it and picking off the bugs when it was small and waiting three years for the first peach.
- It is changing your calendar to sit with someone who is in pain, so they can live with themselves long enough to let healing flow.
- It is making room for another's questions and insights – helping them learn what they know, even when it is not a very efficient use of your precious time. In addition, it is making time to sit still longer – so the still, small voice of Call has a chance.

This week, when the Celebration Circle mission group met, Rachel Halterman, our worship leader, offered an idea that links a commitment to spiritual practice and loving service with the commandment of Christ to love one another. It was written by Carter Heyward in [Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right](#).

"... I interpret the Passion of Jesus as the basis of how he lived in the context of similar quandaries and questions. He lived passionately. By that, I mean that he lived a fully human life – really present, deeply rooted in God, able to be there with and for others, friend and stranger alike. He was able to be in the question, share the quandaries, not put himself outside or above others. There was nothing pretentious about Jesus, and certainly nothing moralistic. He

was simply himself, an embodied bearer of hope and faith to sisters and brothers for whom life itself often must have seemed like a quandary of suffering and confusion." For me, that sounds like a commitment to spiritual practice and encouraging service.

As our last hymn says:

*"When our hearts are wintery, grieving, or in pain,
"Christ's warm touch can call us back to life again.
"Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
"Love is come again like wheat that rises green."*

Jesus says: "I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last ... so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete ... (and) I am giving you these commandments so that you may love one another."

And Andy Holmes says: "the fruit of the vine is food for the gardener."

And I say: "**Amen!**"