

“FRUITFUL: Excellent Fruit”

Genesis 12:1-3 • John 15:1-13

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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For the past few weeks we have been looking at these five practices of fruitful congregations – radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. These are all practices that we engage in personally and together that form us into the church God wants us to be, a church that makes a difference in the lives of people, a church that makes a difference in our community. I hope that’s the kind of church *you* want to be involved in. But what exactly does it mean for our church to be fruitful? And is that something we should even be concerned with? Isn’t it more important to be faithful than fruitful?

Before we can answer what being fruitful looks like, we need to see that God does in fact call us to bear fruit. In our reading from John 15, Jesus says, “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” Then in verse 8 he says, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” In other words, the way we know we are Jesus’ disciples is that we bear fruit. If you are a follower of Jesus you *will* be fruitful.

So the question for us today is, what is the fruit Jesus wants us to produce? *Love*. Jesus says, “Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” Then he tells us what he expects: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” This echoes what he said back in John 13: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” You could actually say that John considered this the most important thing Jesus ever said. He

repeats it five times in 1 John and then again in 2 John. We also find the command to love one another five times in 1 Peter and throughout Paul’s letters.

What does loving one another look like? In Romans 12:10 Paul says, “Love one another with brotherly affection.” Just before that, in verses 4 and 5, he said, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” Being the church means loving one another as family, actually closer than family. We are to be as close as parts of the body. As members of the Body of Christ we have an obligation to each other. As Paul says, we are members of one another.

The way this works in the church is by sharing our resources and one of our most valuable resources is time. I think this is one of the things Jesus is trying to teach us in his image of the vine and the branches. He is illustrating for us the Great Commandment, which he said is to love God and love others. Every command in the Bible fits into one of those categories. It’s important to know that when Jesus says “you are the branches” it’s plural. He’s talking to the whole Church. He’s talking to all of us. The word abide means to remain close. But we don’t do it alone. Abiding, remaining close to Jesus, means remaining close to all the other branches, too. We are to be as close to one another as branches are to the vine.

The second thing Jesus shows us about loving one another is that it involves sacrifice. In verse 12 Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Love involves sacrifice. This kind of sacrificial love is actually what made the early church grow and eventually take over the

Roman Empire. Several times in the second and third centuries plagues swept through parts of the Roman Empire, sometimes claiming the lives of thousands every day. When that happened, many of the people living in the cities left for more remote areas trying to escape the plagues. But the Christians stayed behind to care for the sick and to bury the dead. They risked their own health to minister to others. As the Christians showed this uncharacteristic sacrificial love in a society that was entirely focused on self, people were attracted to it and the church grew in spite of the hardships and even persecution from the government.

This kind of self-giving love is the key to deep, meaningful relationships. The Bible is clear that God made us for relationships. At the very beginning of the Bible, God said, "It's not good for man to be alone." You and I were made in the image of God, who is in perfect relationship – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John Ortberg writes, "Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and water are to the human body." It turns out that community is the place where God meets us.

The gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus giving us the great commission and then he makes a *promise*. He says, "I will be with you always." God promises over and over that he will not leave us alone. He will be with us. When he calls Abraham to leave his country and go to another place, God says, "I will be with you." He promises to be with Moses when he confronts Pharaoh and with Joshua as they are about to cross into the Promised Land. He makes the same promise to Gideon and to Isaiah and to you. Jesus says, "You will be with me forever."

The promise, though, is not a private promise between you and God. The promise is that he will be with us *in community*. Being a follower of Jesus means being in relationships with other believers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. We belong to one

another." This is what Paul is saying when he compares the Church to a body. He says that "each part working together makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

The Greek word the Bible uses for this kind of Christian community is *koinonia*. We usually translate it as "fellowship." Acts 2:42, says, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the *fellowship*." We often make the mistake in churches of thinking of fellowship as punch and cookies. We call the room where we consume punch and cookies the "fellowship hall." And that completely misses the point. That's NOT biblical fellowship. Philippians 1 uses the same word, *koinonia*, but it's translated as partnership. "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your *partnership* in the gospel from the first day until now."

One of our core values in this church is relationship. "We believe that being a follower of Jesus means being in a mutual, loving, praying community centered on Christ with a common mission of knowing Christ and making Christ known." Christian fellowship is about deep, personal relationships where we encounter Jesus, and it's in that fellowship, that community of believers, that we become part of a mission, the mission of God in the world. As we go together, baptizing and teaching, Jesus is with us. That's the promise. And that's the purpose of the Church. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:12, the church exists "to equip the saints for the work of ministry." What is that ministry for which *you* are supposed to be equipped? Loving people. Not just the people that are easy to love, but all people.

God wants us to love our neighbors, the people all around us in our community, who don't follow Jesus. God wants to use you to show people how much he loves them. How does he do use us to reach people? Through radical hospitality, welcoming strangers into our lives so that they become part of the family; through passionate worship; through intentional faith development – growing our own faith and

helping others to grow; through risk-taking mission and service where we step out in faith to meet the needs of others; and extravagant generosity, where we give generously to God's work of changing lives, trusting Him to provide for our own needs. These are the practices of fruitful congregations, the tools God uses to help us to bear fruit and change lives. I can't think of a greater calling than this.

Amen.