

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

This morning I am going to ask you to do something that may make you think I am crazy. If you think that, that's OK; there is a method in my madness. Here is what I want you to do: Just imagine that you are a tree. There you are, a tree, rooted in the ground. You can't move of your own accord. The only time you get to move is when the wind blows. You like it when it rains as long as it is not too much. The question, however, is not how you live as a tree, or what you feel or like. No, the question is what kind of tree are you? By kind, I mean type, species if you will, but not in Latin. You know: aspen; cottonwood, oak; maple; hickory, pecan, cedar, pine, piñon or ponderosa; fruit, apple, cherry, peach, or plum. As a tree, what are you? What kind are you? Don't tell me or anybody else. Just keep it to yourself; what the first kind of tree it was that you thought of yourself as being. I have an idea that nobody thought of themselves as a hawthorn.

Now I know that here in southwestern Colorado, we don't have a lot of variety in the way of trees. We don't have white oaks and tulip poplars that grow to be 100 feet tall and six feet in diameter. It's too dry for cypress; and except for imported species, the only oaks and maples we have are Gambel's oak (that's oak brush) and the Western Mountain Maple. Mostly what we think of as trees out here are aspens, ponderosas, and then maybe piñons or junipers; and if you go farther north or higher up we see lodgepole pines and spruce and fir.

The thing about trees, aside from the fact that the bodies of all of them are some sort of wood, is that they all make some sort of flowers and then seeds. For some trees, such as oaks, the seeds just fall right under the tree, while others get blown away by the wind, like the maple seeds with their wings. For fruit trees, the seeds are usually inside something nice and tasty, that falls right under the tree, but may get eaten or carried away from the tree before the actual seeds finally hit the ground and get a chance to sprout and take root.

For the kinds of trees we call fruit trees, the seeds are actually inside the pulp of what we call the fruit, while for others such as oaks and maples, the seeds in their shells, or the seeds with their wings are the actual fruit of the tree, as are the seeds of the ponderosa and the piñon. When

you come right down to it, the purpose of a tree is to make more trees of its own kind, so the fruit of the tree is its seeds; and the fruit of the seeds is another tree.

Now, think of the kind of tree you thought of yourself as. What kind of fruit or seed does it bear? Are its fruits or seeds useful to anything else, or are they poisonous as are the seeds and fruits of some plants?

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells a short parable about trees that bear good fruit and those that bear evil fruit. At the beginning of this Gospel lesson, in the first verse of it, Jesus warns of false prophets: Matthew 7:15 **15 "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.** In the next verse, He immediately switches to the metaphor of fruit, where *fruit* means the outcome or effects of what they preach. Remember, a prophet was a person who spoke for God and gave God's message to the people. That message may or may not have foretold something that was going to happen in the future. There are many false prophets today, people who claim they giving their people God's message when what they are really doing is calling evil, good and good, evil. Many such do this while wearing vestments and preaching what they think is a message of social justice that trumps God's message in the Bible, such as those who call abortion, a blessing; and those who celebrate the idea of same-sex marriage and are willing to officiate at such services. We pray for them to repent, but they persist in saying that we are the ones who are wrong. Unfortunately for them, the Bible offers no support for their beliefs.

So, in verse 16, Jesus tells his listeners and us, how to recognize these wolves in sheep's clothing: Matthew 7:16 **16 You will know them by their fruits.** and then asks rhetorically **Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?**, building his case for what comes next.

Then Jesus begins to speak in the fashion of a parable, but it is really not a story with what might seem to have an obscure meaning. The only thing is that might seem to be obscure is that He does not make the immediate identification of the good trees with those who have repented and believe in Him as opposed to the bad trees which are identified with those who reject Jesus and His teachings. Jesus then nails down his argument in the next two verses: Matthew 7:17-18 **17 "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.** I should note here that the Greek word that is translated as bad or unhealthy or diseased is **πονηρός**, which carries a connotation of evil, so *bad* is a better translation of it than *unhealthy*, which is the way the ESV puts it. Jesus

has covered good and bad in both directions: Good trees bear good fruit; bad trees bear bad fruit. No good trees bear bad fruit; and no bad trees bear good fruit.

A persnickety logician might at this point ask, “What about trees that produce no fruit?” I think you will see that Scripture has answered that question. One does not expect immature trees to produce fruit, so no one should try to apply this parable to children. However, mature trees (and people) who produce **no** fruit are in imminent danger as shown in the story of the fig tree in Matthew 21 and Mark 11. This fig tree was in full leaf, but had no figs on it; so Jesus cursed it as we read in Matthew 21:19 **19 And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.**” Also, the Parable of the Talents in Mathew 25 answers the question of what happens to trees that bear no fruit. The servant who buried his talent of silver in the ground and gained nothing from it while the master was away. His reward was explained in Matthew 25:30 **30 "And the worthless bond-servant [was] cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”**

Considering this question got us a little ahead of our story. We had gotten through verse 18. the rest of the story tells us of the fate of the trees that bear bad fruit as well as of the trees that bear no fruit. Matthew 7:19-21 **19 "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 "So then, by their fruits you will know them. 21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.”** Actually verse 19 also tells us of the fate of those trees that don’t bear fruit at all: trees that don’t bear good fruit get cut down and burned. For trees not to get cut down and burned, the trees have to bear fruit, and it has to be good fruit.

What Jesus is doing here is fulfilling his role as a prophet, and He is giving what is called and *eschatological* prophecy, that means a prophecy about the last things, of what is going to happen at the end of time, at the Judgment.

God doesn’t want to see just trees; He wants to see fruit. So my weird question of asking you to imagine yourself to be a tree, and then asking what kind of tree, was a all a matter of trying to get you think about the metaphors hiding in the Gospel lesson. It doesn’t matter if you thought of yourself as a pear tree with a partridge, or a giant ponderosa that sheds little bitty seeds from big cones. All real trees usually give forth some kind of fruit, and so do we as metaphorical trees. The question then becomes “What should we do to make sure we bear fruit, and that it is good fruit?” The Epistle lesson from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans helps here.

St. Paul begins with a slightly cryptic verse: Romans 8:12 **12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.** Even if we read the entire lesson, we still wonder, To whom, or what, are we in debt? This verse is cryptic only because it is a conclusion drawn from verses that precede this one. Here, at a minimum is what should have preceded that: Romans 8:8-12 **8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. 12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.** Now we can see that the reason we are not in debt to the flesh is because we are in debt to the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. We know that the Holy Spirit is in us because of God's Providence through which we have received the gift of Faith.

St. Paul is always writing of the never-ending war between the flesh and the Spirit. This week I saw a posting of a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Leander Harding who is a professor of Pastoral Theology at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. Prof. Harding has twice been nominated to be a Bishop in the Episcopal church, but has not been elected because he is considered to be too conservative. In one paragraph in that sermon, Prof. Harding explains the differences between the body, the flesh, and the spirits, the spirit of the person and the Holy Spirit. In his sermon he tells us that we have received a sort of earnest money, a down payment so to speak on the promises of God. He then explains it this way:

This down payment is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Last week I talked about how in the New Testament it is not body and spirit that are opposites but flesh and spirit. Flesh is the entire human person, body and spirit, in rebellion, turned away from God. Spirit is the entire human person turned toward God in repentance, worship and obedience by the sacrificial love of the saviour. When we turn to Christ and lay hold by faith of the costly love and mercy that He extends to us, He gives us His Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a spirit of freedom, a spirit to assist us to overcome the sin which pulls us down. The Holy Spirit is not a spirit of fear but of adoption, a spirit that lets us join with Jesus in His prayer and say, "Our Father." The Holy Spirit bears witness that we are children of God and heirs with Jesus Christ of all the promises of God. In this world where the wheat and weeds grow together we have the first fruits of the life of the world to come—God's down payment testimony of the things to come.

Prof. Harding did not give any scripture references, but it is clear that when he speaks of the Holy Spirit as a spirit of Adoption in the same paragraph in which he discusses flesh and the spirit, that he has to have in mind our Epistle lesson. It is not just our bodies that are in action when we sin; it is also our spirits, our human spirits that see that some pleasure it thinks can be gained when we turn away from God. But the Holy Spirit now dwells within us, and slowly, but surely turns us away from the desires of the flesh, which Prof. Harding tells us is the sinful combination of the body and the fallen human spirit. It is this inward leading of the Holy Spirit that turns us, slowly but surely, away from bringing forth bad fruit to bringing forth good fruit, not much at first perhaps, but more and more as time goes on and we realize that we are indeed children of God and heirs of His Kingdom, and ultimately, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

Is there truly a lesson here in today's Bible lessons? Yes! It is that as Christians, we are not allowed to be passive. Our faith must be positive and active. We must read the Bible and understand what God wants us to do in this life, which is to be witnesses to Jesus Christ and His message of Salvation. We are to take that message to others. We are to offer that cup of cool water to the thirsty and the water of Baptism to those who have not been baptized. We are to be a beacon of light on a hill, not a candle hid under a bushel basket. Here is where one of the invitations to make an offering takes on a different meaning: Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.

For those who have no faith and no church, all you have to do is open a door in conversation, and the Holy Spirit can enter a willing heart. Let the fruit of your spirit cast seeds into the hearts of others. That is the way we can truly bear good fruit, the fruit of the Spirit.

AMEN!

Let us pray.

Almighty and most gracious Father, from whom cometh every good and perfect gift, grant us grace through Thy Holy Spirit, that we may turn away from the sinful desires of the flesh, and be inspired to greater service for Thee, so that each day we may each show forth our faith in our lives, to the glory of Thy Name and the growth of Thy Kingdom, that the fruits of our labors in thy Name, and the examples of our lives, may magnify Thee throughout the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*