

Fruit

Luke 13:6-17

Cradock Presbyterian Church

August 25, 2013

One of those things that people bring up from time to time, maybe just to have a little fun, is to argue about “What is a fruit?” You get into stuff like, “Why, a tomato is a fruit!” “Yeah, then why do we call it a vegetable?” Here’s an easy, accurate definition: a fruit is something that has its seeds inside it, so that more fruit can grow from it. It bears fruit by making more fruit trees, or plants, that bear fruit.

Today’s chunk of Luke’s gospel is really all about bearing fruit. At first glance, you wouldn’t know that. That first section I just read, about towers falling on people and Pilate being Pilate – what does that have to do with fruit? And what does a healed woman have to do with fruit? Here’s the thing: the story about the fig tree is directly about bearing fruit; the story about the healed woman is a visible demonstration of truly “bearing fruit.” I’ll make the connection with the first verses later.

Let’s start with the fig tree. In most of the middle east, fig trees are as common to the terrain and the culture as apple trees are for us. And as much of a staple, too. People ate figs every day. So a barren fig tree, in an orchard of otherwise healthy, productive fig trees, is a liability. The gardeners of their day usually addressed this by spreading manure on the tree to fertilize it, and giving it lots water. Now, what do we know about manure? It’s waste; it’s disgusting to most folks; it’s smelly, it makes your eyes water if you get around a lot of it. Working with it is tough. But you had to do it, if you wanted a tree to survive and thrive. For those Jews, piling on that manure also made them unclean, so to put manure around a plant was, in a sense, a sacrificial act.

You do it so others may eat. It was absolutely necessary if you wanted the tree to survive. Remember that sacrificial part for later.

I know the owner of the orchard sounds kinda cold, wanting to cut down that poor tree. The owner was right to want to cut it down and re-use the space. That's just good business. I'm sure that same scenario was played out regularly in every orchard in Israel. But the gardener must have had an attachment to that old tree. He must have seen something promising in it, because he had compassion on it. He intervened with the owner of the orchard for it, and he saved that tree. My friends, this story is about us! Jesus, the gardener, sees something promising in us. The suffering he undertook on our behalf, the teachings he left for us that directly led to that suffering, were in a sense a spreading of manure on the very roots of our life. His cross was disgusting; it was a tough thing he did, making sure he'd be crucified. He did it because it was absolutely necessary in order for us to be saved. His intervention on our behalf with the owner of the orchard – God – has ensured that we get to live on, and we get the chance to be fruitful.

You know what else this story is about? It's about repentance. This fig tree had one job: bear fruit. It hasn't been doing it. Maybe it couldn't. But suddenly, it gets a chance, because the act of spreading the manure and caring for the tree has made that possible. When that tree bore fruit, and we certainly hope it did, you can say that the gardener had "turned it around." Folks, the definition of repentance is "to turn around." Now I know we don't really think in terms of a *tree* repenting. But think of this: it's the job of the tree to bear fruit for the owner. The tree has the possibility of bearing fruit. If the

tree doesn't bear fruit, it's not being what it's supposed to be. It's no good to anybody, especially the owner. You and I have the possibility of bearing fruit, put into us by God our creator. If we don't bear fruit, are we being what we're supposed to be? What good are we?

Here's the thing: in the person of Jesus Christ, God has seen the possibility in us, just as the gardener saw it in the fig tree. Even though we have often refused to bear that fruit because of our own reasons – all of which you could properly label “sin” – we have a gardener who was willing to do the sacrificial manure-spreading of the cross and the powerful teachings that he knew were going to lead to it. His name is Jesus Christ; and he's still watering us and caring for us right now. He has never given up on us, even though, by rights, he should. Because of his work in and with us, we have the possibility of bearing fruit in abundance.

So what is this fruit? Paul writes about our fruits many times; but the best he does is in Galatians, in the 5th chapter, verses 19-23. Allow me to read these to you:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Did you see how the list of bad things, “works of the flesh,” are all self-centered?

There's no reaching out to others here, at least not in a positive way; and if there's no outreach, there's no chance to bear fruit. Most of those on the first list come from a warped spirit within a person. But those good fruits! – they're all outward looking, they

all involve good things with others. All of our “bearing fruit” involves bearing it through other people. You know how people are: if you treat others in these fruitful ways, they will almost always go and treat others the same. And if they do that, guess what? You have produced loads of wonderful fruit. All of this is to show you how you know when you’re producing good fruit: when we’re outward-looking, concerned about others; and when the things we do have in them the seeds that will produce fruit in others, we’re “bearing fruit.”

Yeah, yeah, this is all good in theory. But what does it look like in practice? Leave it to Jesus to show us, in a remarkable way. As the text goes on to say, “Just then” a woman comes onto the scene. Actually, the original language implies she was already there. That makes sense; the first verse of that section reminds us that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. This woman was in that crowd of people. The original language actually says, “Behold, a woman having a spirit of weakness for 18 years was completely bent over, and unable to stand up straight.” She had probably come to the synagogue for comfort, for hope, to hear that God was a God who healed. She might even have come because she heard that Jesus was there, was teaching. But as you know, those people thought that bad ailments were the result of your sin, somehow, some way. So in all likelihood she had been shunted off to the back somewhere, in the same way that churches in our country used to put the slaves in the balcony in the days of slavery. This woman’s infirmity made her totally unable to bear fruit of any kind. She couldn’t even help herself. And it wasn’t her fault! Luke wants you to connect the 18 years of her sickness with the 18 people killed by the falling tower in

the very first section. The connection through the number 18 is this: those 18 who had the tower fall on them didn't do anything to deserve it. Neither did this poor, bent-over woman. She was going to need mercy, just like that fig tree. Little did she know that not only was she about to receive mercy – her life was about to be completely turned around.

Jesus, says the original language, “shouted out” to her to come to him. It's important to remember how hard that was going to be for her. Remember, this was a spirit, and one of weakness, at that. The long walk from the back of the synagogue was probably quite painful and labored. Might even have been a little embarrassing. She heard Jesus call to her; with a great deal of pain and effort she got herself to him. He put his hands on her, a sign of his care for her, and simply spoke. AND THEN something remarkable happened. For the first time in 18 years, she was no longer weak and no longer helplessly bent over!

So what does she do? IMMEDIATELY she starts to praising God, and this isn't a one-time thing. She did it again and again, that's what the original language tells us. And you know what happens when someone keeps speaking powerfully of God: people listen. That means that in her praising, this now-healed woman was bearing fruit. We don't have it recorded, but I bet a bunch of people became believers that day because of her.

I think you and I are like *both* the fig tree *and* the woman who was healed. We're like the fig tree because we have received mercy, and because we need the nutrients of the spirit that our Lord spreads on us. We might not survive without them. We're like the

fig tree in another way: we've been saved from being "cut down," and given another chance to bear fruit. We're like this woman because sometimes life has weighed us down, life has bent us over, and we can't "get straight" on our own. We need to hear Jesus calling out to us, and we need to have the courage and tenacity to go to him. If we do, then what Jesus does for us will be enough to keep us "praising and praising," and bearing fruit on and on.

There is a caution here. It's not all one-sided. Remember, the owner of the orchard gave the fig tree *one more year* to begin bearing fruit. The time had come to produce. There's a reason why Luke put the story of the healing of this woman with the fig tree story. This woman didn't wait! It didn't take her a year! As soon as she knew what God had done in her, she started bearing fruit by praising God right away. You and I know all the things God has done for us, and we ought to know by now that we're completely equipped to bear much fruit. We need to get down to fruitfulness RIGHT NOW!

And that's especially important in the world in which we live. There's a terrible hunger out there for God. You've heard the statistics for Cradock a few times, that more than 80% of those who live here are unchurched. In the whole U.S. the figures are only a little less. Churches that feed that hunger with God's fruit are growing and producing more fruit. You know *we* have produced much fruit, done the things Paul said are "fruits of the Spirit." We've fed and sheltered the homeless, the "least of these" Jesus told us to care for. We've helped out families directly; we've made our church available for the Food Bank to feed hundreds each month. We've taken many hurting people under our

wings and helped and healed them. But that's all in the past. We can't stop bearing fruit now, or the owner of the vineyard might decide to take action. The imperfect tense in the original tells us that the healed woman kept on praising and praising. Let's you and me keep praising and praising, keep bearing fruit with our mouths and our hands. Then we will see the seedlings of many other trees that come from our fruit, altogether making a glorious orchard of faith for God.

Let us pray: Help us, O Lord, to realize the powerful way you've made it possible for us to bear fruit. Don't let the world wither us or shut us up; keep us growing in grace so we can lead others to you. This we ask, in your powerful, beautiful name, AMEN.