**“Good Fruit”**

Luke 6:43-45

May 7, 2017, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

We are spending a few weeks in Luke 6. In our passage today, Jesus offers a very simple analogy about life. He talks about how a good tree bears good fruit and how a bad tree bears bad fruit. And it is clear that we are the “trees” He is talking about. Jesus has come, not just to save us for eternity, but to save us now. He wants to teach us how to live now so that our lives produce “good fruit.” Jesus wants us to be good people who bring good things out of the true goodness stored up in our heart by our love for Him.

It’s not a hard analogy to understand in principle. But it raises a very important follow-up question. What qualifies as “good fruit?” How do we know if that’s what we are actually producing? And how do we get the kind of heart that produces this “good fruit” more than just occasionally? These are important questions because as I look back on just how I lived this past week, on some of the decisions I made, some of the conversations I had, and especially some of the thoughts I had, I’m pretty sure some of it wasn’t exactly “good fruit.”

So, what is this “good fruit?” Jesus longs to see in our lives? I don’t know how much of this question we can answer today, but I’m going to try to get us started by painting a picture or two.

Years and years ago, when I in seminary at Duke Divinity School, I heard a sermon. It was given by a pastor named Will Campbell who was, by his own admission, a “renegade” Baptist preacher to the poor and the prejudiced in the south. Through the magic of the Internet I discovered that it was Sunday, February 6, 1977 when he delivered it. Will based his message that day on Matthew 25. In Matthew 25 Jesus says there are some folks who are going to be welcome in His kingdom and He says they are going to be welcome because, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ And when the faithful ask, “When did we do this?” Jesus gives that beautiful answer, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of *the least of these* brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Will Campbell based his entire message on that statement by Jesus and simply asked us, over and over again, ‘Who are the least of these?’ I can’t remember all of his illustrations, but I did remember one, and I refreshed my memory of it this week online.

On November 4, 1960, near the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, Federal Marshalls in New Orleans, Louisiana, escorted a little four-year old African American girl named Ruby Bridges to an all white elementary school to start kindergarten. In order to earn the right to attend that school she had passed a very difficult test that was specifically designed to make it almost impossible for a black child to pass. On her way to school she passed through a gauntlet of angry folks who called her every foul name in the book. I can still hear Will Campbell asking is Ruby Bridges one of the “least of these?”

I found an article online with more information about what happened when Ruby went to that school and I’d like to read a bit of it to you. “As soon as Bridges entered the school, white parents pulled their own children out; all the teachers refused to teach while a black child was enrolled. Only one person agreed to teach Ruby and that was Barbara Henry, from Boston, Massachusetts, and for over a year Henry taught her alone, “as if she were teaching a whole class.” That first day, Bridges and her adult companions spent the entire day in the principal’s office; the chaos of the school prevented their moving to the classroom until the second day. On the second day, however, a white student broke the boycott and entered the school when a 34-year-old Methodist minister, Lloyd Anderson Foreman, walked his 5-year-old daughter Pam through the angry mob…”

Was Barbara Henry, the woman who taught Ruby for a whole year, a good tree? Would you describe her actions as “good fruit?” What about that Methodist minister? Without knowing anything more about them, I’d say yes, yes they were. And when I read about what they did I think to myself, ‘That’s what I hope I would have done if I were in their shoes.’ That’s a good tree bearing good fruit from a good heart.

Let’s take this a little further. What kind of tree is Riverside? Are we a good tree bearing good fruit? If someone asked me that question I’d probably start to answer by talking about our work with Habitat for Humanity and how we are planning for our 26th and 27th homes. Then I’d point to our work with NNEMAP food pantry and Vinton County CARE and the help that is provided for those in need. I could talk about the men whose lives have been saved through the work of the Refuge ministry we support, or the 150 plus who gather here each week for AA, Al-anon, Narcotics anonymous, and so on. Or how about the lives that have been changed both in Appalachia and here because of our 20 plus year involvement with Appalachian Service Project? Or the thousands of people in places we’ve never heard of who are drinking clean water through our work with Living Water. You get the idea. I think this is the kind of good fruit Jesus is thinking of. And then I would add that almost every week I hear about someone doing something simple, something under the radar, to help someone in need, and I can’t even put a number on that.

I could go on, but I’d like to change gears a little bit. I want you to hear from a slightly different kind of fruit the Holy Spirit has produced here. Let’s call this spiritual fruit. Again it is hard to quantify this, but I want you to hear from someone who has begun to produce fruit of his own because of the spiritual fruit sown by others in this church.

(Pastor Herman) “My fruit hath ripened (is ripening)”

When Susan and I first started coming t Riverside about 17 years ago I would say my “fruit” were few, small and green. I came regularly, got fed and got out of here about as quick as I could. At our previous church, I remember getting a call by some brave soul at the church asking me to get involved; to which I said: “do you have any idea how busy I am.” Looking back being busy was not the main excuse, I think I was afraid of not measuring up, not fitting in. So it seemed safer to be a “loner”. It’s hard to bear good fruit when you are a loner.

So just how does one begin to bear “good” fruit. First, the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. God actively seeks us by His grace. His grace stirs our desire to know him and helps us to respond to His invitation to be in a relationship with Him. And his Spirit is at work both on its own and through others. But here’s the bad news, we can say no; we can refuse the invitation: “do you have any idea how busy I am”.

I want to talk about how God has used this church to grow and ripen fruit in me. First, let me start with David. The reason we kept coming back was his preaching. Not just his “style”; He was preaching the Gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ. The more I heard, the more I wanted to hear. Paul tells us in Romans “faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ” (NLT). And again the Holy Spirit is at work when we open ourselves to hear the Gospel. Growth takes hold and begins to change us (grow fruit) when we interact, when we hang with others who have faith. In Hebrews 4:2. We also had the good news preached to us, just as the Israelites did. However, the message they heard didn’t help them because they weren’t united in faith with the ones who listened to it. I believe the writer of Hebrews is telling us that we grow and come to bear fruit by not just coming to church but by being the church.

I remember when Tom Thompson came and gave his witness about how God called him to the refuge ministry for men battling addictions. The Spirit was at work in him that day and me. I noticed that a group of folks were taking food down to refuge that evening in the church van and by the grace of God, I went along (without Susan). I really didn’t know anyone; I took a chance. I remember we didn’t make it to the refuge in Vinton county because the water was so high. Ron Foster was there (he bought everyone’s dinner at Bob Evans on the way home). And I’ll bet you those folks in the Van had no idea how they were being used by being followers of Christ. I said to Susan when I got back that I now had some church homies.

And then there was this fellow named Jon Jones. I don’t know how we became friends. I do know I didn’t seek him out. I know you know now Jon (because you are in heaven); how much God used you to bear fruit in my life. Jon gently but relentlessly got me to come to men’s group on Thursday mornings. I have to admit at first I really wasn’t as interested in what was going on in the other guys lives – I wanted to get into the bible lesson. But that changed over time. Jon and Anna were there to send me off on my Emmaus weekend in 2005 too. He was there for many.

Jon died suddenly in 2008 and I began to make the coffee in the morning because that’s what my friend Jon did. That’s when I got to know this Iranian woman in the kitchen who prayed over the coffee. Her prayers seem to go on forever. But friends we grow when we interact (when we hang) with others who reflect Christ. Over time her prayers seemed to get shorter or maybe I was feeling at ease (fruit ripening). One day, As Jaleh said come lets pray over the coffee. She said You Pray. It was a short prayer but the first time I prayed out loud in front of another person. I wonder if you know, Jaleh how God has used you to prepare others to bear fruit.

I don’t have the time and my list is too long of how God has used and continues to use you in this Church in my calling. You see when we minister to others we get ministered to. You see I got called by God into ministry through you and for you. And friends you may not be called to stand up here, but you are being called. Proverbs 27:17 tells us “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” May we at Riverside keep sharpening each other and bearing fruit until the Kingdom of God has been made present to all. Amen