

Logs, Fruit, And Houses

Luke 6:41-49
October 17, 2010

I.

I spent last Tuesday through Friday at the Gray Center, which is the diocesan retreat facility. It was the annual Diocese of Mississippi clergy conference, when all the priests and deacons in the state get together to discuss matters of common interest.

And we heard the good news that Church of the Redeemer in Biloxi now has been rebuilt and will begin services in its new building in November. This means that all six Episcopal churches destroyed in Hurricane Katrina are now back in operation even though most churches on the coast, including St. Thomas, have not yet returned to their pre-Katrina attendance levels.

This recovery would not have been possible without the assistance that Bishop Gray and the diocese provided during this difficult period. For almost three years the diocese gave financial subsidies to all ten Episcopal churches along the coast, again including St. Thomas. This has enabled each of us to operate as we work to recover from the storm.

And while I was at the conference I was talking with one of my colleagues about what's going on at St. Thomas, and I mentioned that today would be our fall clean-up. He thought I was referring to our stewardship campaign. I explained that ours was a different kind of clean-up.

But many churches in Mississippi do what is called an "every member canvass" every year at this time. Someone from the stewardship committee comes to your door and hands you a pledge card with a request that you complete it and put it in a sealed envelope.

We have not done that for many years at St. Thomas, and would prefer not to start. Last year however, we began a user friendly variation on the "every member" aspect of the idea.

We held a series of eight "stewardship socials" which were small group meetings in church members' homes where we could have social time together and discuss stewardship in a group setting. We did not bring pledge cards to the meetings, but rather were interested in hearing the thoughts and ideas of those who attended. People could either speak or listen as they chose.

Everyone in the church was invited to one of the socials. And the invitation lists were basically randomly determined, so if people had schedule conflicts they could arrange to come to another social at a different time. These events last year were well-attended, and the general feeling was that they worked well.

So, we are going to do it again this year, and during the last part of October and first part of November everyone in the church will be invited to come to one of the socials. Invitations already are being mailed. And Sid and Mary Mizell, our stewardship chairs, will speak to you briefly next Sunday with more details about these events and our overall stewardship campaign.

II.

Today's sermon about our readings will be a little shorter than usual because I know we all are anxious to get to work on sprucing up the church. And today's Gospel reading lends itself to brevity because it contains three very clear and concise teachings of Jesus that offer basic guidance on Christian living.

We heard Jesus caution us against complaining about other people when we ourselves are open to complaint. Then he said that we can be known by what we do and say. Finally, he stressed the importance of building our faith on a strong foundation.

These are not complicated ideas. We regularly hear them in church, and our parents probably drilled them into us from our youth. And today I want to begin with the first and third teachings on hypocrisy and discipleship, and close with some thoughts about the importance of bearing good fruit.

Jesus began with symbolism, as he frequently did. He said we should not worry about a speck in someone else's eye when we have logs in our own eyes. That image makes me cringe a little. I had a cataract removed earlier this year, and so the idea of foreign matter in my eye gets my attention.

Perhaps a good illustration of Jesus' words is the story of two fellows who, while taking a walk, stopped in front of a taxidermy shop where an owl was on display in the window.

They began to criticize the way it was mounted. They said its eyes were not natural, and its wings were not properly positioned. In addition, they thought its feathers were not neatly arranged, and the feet could have been placed more realistically.

And just as they finished their faultfinding, the owl turned its head, and blinked. And, of course, the moral is that it's easier to be critical than correct. These fellows thought the owl had a speck in its eye, so to speak, when in fact their own observations were way off the mark. It's the old story. Jesus calls us to make sure our own house is in order before we criticize someone else's.

And he also calls us to build our houses on firm foundations. That's the last part of the reading. It's also in Matthew's Gospel, where the symbolic comparison is about those who build houses on rock, and those who build on sand. The houses might look the same and serve equally well in good weather, but when the winds and floods come, the houses built on sand will fall.

And Jesus' point here is about believing in him in our hearts as well as accepting him in our heads. We are called to practice what Jesus preached. That means that through faith, belief, and action, we are transformed into a new creation in him.

St. Paul set forth this idea in Second Corinthians. He said, "The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that [he] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away [and] has become new! (5:14-15, 17).

At various times during the year, I urge everyone to ask Jesus to come into their lives. And I always say even if you have asked him before, do it again. We might think we know Jesus already, but he always calls us to deepen that relationship. And truly living in him is how we extend our foundations through the sand and into the rock.

III.

The remaining part of the reading continues with metaphors as Jesus told us that trees are known by their fruit. He said that figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The teaching here is that we are known by what we are and what we do.

And Jesus was not talking about horticulture. He wasn't giving lessons on farming. He meant once again, just as he told us about foundations, rocks, and sand, that our faith calls us to be transformed so that we can bear godly fruit in our lives.

So, let's ask what it means to be fruitful. St. Paul told us in the Book of Galatians that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (5:22-23). And he said in Colossians that bearing fruit is living lives worthy of the Lord, and growing in the knowledge of God (1:10).

What does this mean as a practical matter? In a way we can bear inner fruit and outer fruit. The first type is an inner sense of joy and peace that comes with obedience, prayer, and trying to live a holy life. We sense God's presence, and know that we never are alone.

And this can lead to outer manifestations of fruit, which is helping others, ministry in the community, and doing things that show God's glory to others. Fruit that grows within us can lead to more fruit that grows in the church and the community to help others.

But we must sincerely seek the Lord. If we just act outwardly, and leave our hearts untouched, then that will be as useful as tying a bunch of grapes to a bramble bush. As the reading tells us, it just won't work. We might look like Christians on the outside, but God will know the truth.

IV.

Today's reading conveys some vivid images; logs in our eyes, thorns and bramble bushes, houses washed away in floods. But Jesus said what he said. His teachings made clear that we cannot just have the warm and loving idea of Christ without the accepting the responsibility and accountability that comes with his love.

And so, our lives can be full and fruitful, or they can be dry and withered. Our faith can have a firm foundation or it can leave us feeling empty. We can do things Christ's way, or we can do things our way. It all comes down to what we think and believe about Jesus Christ, and whether we allow him to be the Lord of our lives. *Amen.*