

Fruitful

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 25:1-10

Reading from the New Testament: Colossians 1:1-14

Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z, Gen Alpha – I can't seem to keep track. Yet I do know that I am a proud member of Generation Frito, having grown up during the apex of the processed food era. Our blood runs O Positive, as in Dorito, Cheeto, Spaghetto, Cheerio, and HoHo. Our breakfast cereal was advertised as part of your complete breakfast, the accompanying photo featuring a complete breakfast with our favorite box of cereal off to the side, having actually no connection to the complete breakfast.

Fruit? We didn't need no stinkin' fruit. We had that covered with Apple Jacks, strawberry Pop Tarts, and Cherry Starburst chews. In middle school, after sweltering late-summer football practices, we would run down to the corner store because that's where the phone was, so we could call our parents to pick us up. And if you had 15 cents you could guzzle a quart of orange ade, a-d-e, as in **absolutely devoid of every** nutrient; and if you had an additional dime, you could get that *healthy* alternative to the Sugar Daddies, a packaged and heavily processed Little Debbie apple pie. We, in the Frito generation, should have enough

chemical preservatives in us that our bodies will still be walking around ten years after we die.

Fruit? That comes from a can, soaked in heavy syrup, heavy with sugar. “Oh, but we had an apple tree in our yard that we so cherished,” said no kid ever. Why? Because it was our assignment to pick up all those rotting apples in the grass so that our dads could mow the yard. It was gross work, and you were continually harassed by the bees.

For the Frito generation, fruit was a taste acquired in adulthood; we grew into it as adults, fearing the embarrassment of those dietary questions at our annual physicals. As a twelve-year-old, I could not have imagined that at the age of 43 I would actually order a big bowl of freshly cut pineapple as my whole meal while traveling in Hawaii, or that at 60, I, Mr. I-hate-sticky-fingers, would relish peeling a blood orange and delight in the explosion of sweetness in my mouth. If fruit is an acquired taste, then maybe I’m finally learning the value of acquiring it, this God-given, nutrient rich, life preserver.

PJ O’Rourke said that fruit is a vegetable with looks and money. And I’d have to agree. As hard as they push it, those broccoli whips

aren't going to sell as well as a grape smoothie. Author Alice Walker said, "Life is better than death, I believe, if only because it is less boring, and because it has fresh peaches in it." The vitamins and nutrients that fruit provides are essential and irreplaceable. I've heard it said that the more *live* foods we eat (i.e. fruit), the more alive we feel. Conversely, the more *dead* foods we eat ... well you get the idea.

Fruit holds a significant presence in scripture as a nutrient, a crop, and a metaphor. Fruit arrived before we did in the creation narrative, "The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God said it was good." Then, when we arrived on the scene, the creator pointed to the fruit trees and said, "You shall have them for food."

Fruit is Exhibit A for the prosecution in Genesis 3. In the covenant between God and God's people, the Lord promised Moses, "Then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing."

When Moses, later, sent forth spies into Canaan, the promised land, they were instructed to bring back some samples of the fruit of the land, and what the spies found amazed them. A single cluster of grapes was so large they had to tie it to a pole to be carried between two of the spies. In the Bible, we read of grapes, figs, olives, pomegranates, dates, and apples, all of which remain essential to the diet of middle eastern cultures today.

It was with the barren fig tree that Jesus had an unexpected kerfuffle. And on a baleful night in an upper room, it was the fermented fruit of the vine that Jesus used to signify the blood of his ultimate sacrifice of love. “In the same way, after they had eaten, Christ took the cup saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for the sins of many. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Seeds being planted, watered, tended, nurtured, bearing life-sustaining fruit that is harvested and shared. This image is so central to the maintenance of life that it provides the perfect metaphor for God’s presence and nurture in our lives in ways that produce fruit for the benefit of all. And so it is that Paul and Timothy write to the Colossian church, “We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of

the love that you have for all the saints ... [on account of the gospel]. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God ... We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will ... so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.”

Colossae was a thriving city five hundred years before Christ was born, located about 110 miles east of Ephesus, in Asia Minor (what we know as modern-day Turkey.) It was celebrated for its wool trade and for a red dye named for the city (*Colossinus*). By the first century of the Common Era, Colossae had diminished in commercial importance and would eventually disappear, yet a church was established there, significant enough to receive a letter from the home office.

The letterhead bore the names of Paul and Timothy, giving it such legitimacy and authority that it would eventually be included in the Canon. Yet, it was not a “hey, how ya’ doin’ kind of communication, but had more of a corrective tone. It seems that self-proclaimed teachers had infiltrated the church with ideas and beliefs that strayed from the

basic gospel of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. There was a mixture of mysticism, astrology, and angel worship that undermined the centrality of the lordship of Christ.

In a way, the Colossian church evinced the impression of a group who had signed up for a class, but had never bothered to read the textbook. Thus, the members had no way to discern whether these intrusive new voices bore the legitimacy of Christ's witness. The authors write with an understanding that if you have not grounded yourself in the teachings of the One in whom you say you believe, you have no way to evaluate whether other voices and other teachings hold water. The authors raise the question of what knowledge you rely on to test the world around you.

“We have not ceased praying for you ... that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work ... May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father...”

Remember that comment I read about fruit: the more *live* foods we eat (i.e. fruit), the more alive we feel. Conversely, the more *dead* foods we eat ... well you get the idea.” You know the old cliché – Junk in ... Junk out. If social media has revealed anything, it is how our self-understanding and our perception of our world are so easily manipulated because we’ve never taken the time to learn or think deeply about the very things we say are important to us. Conspiracy theorists have amassed hordes of followers buying into incomprehensible ideas that bear no relation to the truth, simply because folks have not taken the time to understand at a deeper level what they claim as important to them. They are so busy being pulled down rabbit trails of conspiracy and misinformation that they fail to consider reasoned and vetted information interpreted through the gospel of Christ.

Last week we sang, “The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.” But be honest, since the day of your baptism, what have you done to learn and lean into this Jesus, in whose name you were baptized. Have you studied what he said? Have you observed how he related to others; how he faced the challenges, obstacles, and threats of

life? What have you learned about the way he faced opposition? What have you gleaned from what others said about this Jesus, who we say is our foundation, our authority? What did Paul have to say, or James, Peter, and John about Jesus? Have you observed what other respected voices have said about Jesus through the centuries, voices like Augustine, Anselm, Calvin, Luther, Barth, Nouwen, Barbara Brown Taylor, Buechner, Rachel Held Evans?

Your baptism wasn't a graduation but a launch party. One of the church's greatest challenges is that we carry around college degrees but rely on a kindergartner's understanding of Bible and theology. Again, Paul's fervent prayer is that "you that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may ... bear fruit in every good work."

Do you hear that? From knowledge, and wisdom, and understanding sprout the fruit of good work and growth, work that reflects the mercy of Christ and the growth of an infectious love. What is the fruit we are bearing? As individuals? As a church?

In 1939, legendary jazz singer, Billie Holliday, recorded perhaps the most haunting, wrenching song I have ever heard. The title?

Strange Fruit.

“Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

She was singing about the scourge of lynching in the South. “Here is a fruit for the sun to rot, for the tree to drop ... Here is a strange and bitter crop.” You’ve seen the photos, the tortured black bodies hanging from limbs with crowds of white people observing as if gathered for a concert in the park, most of them planning to be sitting in a pew the next morning. Strange fruit, indeed.

It is important that we listen to what is happening in the world around us, what claims people make about Jesus. Does it harmonize with the Jesus of the Gospels? There is some strange fruit out there. Christian nationalism should be understood as an oxymoron, not followed as a movement. How do we approach subjects like inequality,

health care, human rights, or gun violence in the light of Jesus Christ. If the language or ethos of an idea is gaining traction, we have a responsibility to examine how it appears under the light Jesus' words and actions. Remember, *the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord*. It is from that foundation, that root system that we are fed, and from which we bear fruit. And Paul does not mince words in describing what that fruit should look like, both here in Colossians and in Galatians. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

As a church we must regularly and honestly examine whether that description can be identified in the fruit we produce as a community. In Galatians Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Can that be seen through the ministry we share here? The Confession of 1967 says that your daily action in the world is the

church's mission to the world and the quality of your relation with other persons is the measure of the church's fidelity."

My mother turned 90 this past Tuesday, and when I talked with her, she was chastising herself for not having made it up to the memory care unit to play the piano for the residents there. I know she will *wow* them when she gets there. Similarly, a sagacious retired teacher and member of our church family, Hilreth Dyce, who has found new joy, playing for the residents at her new address at a senior living community in Charleston. Through the years I have regularly heard stories of patients who could no longer identify their family members, yet when someone sang or played a hymn for them, they would light up, sing along, and not miss a single word. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it. Your daily action in the world is the church's mission to the world. The quality of your relation with other persons is the measure of the church's fidelity.

It's been a rough week here at SMPC with four deaths. Yet, to see the rallying of members around families suffering loss is a glorious testament to the gospel of Christ. What happens when we turn that same energy toward a hurting world?

After Bible Study this week, Hilreth forwarded me the a verse of
Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *You Can Never Tell* –

You never can tell when you do an act
Just what the result will be;
But with every deed you are sowing a seed,
Though the harvest you may not see.

So what is the flavor of the fruit we shall bear for the healing of
the nations? Amen.