

Eating Fruit or Bearing Fruit

Nehemiah 9: 32-37

John 15: 5-8

When I was a kid a ridiculous number of years ago, growing up on Long Island, several of our neighbors had random apple and pear trees. Around this time of year, the fruit would be fabulously displayed on the branches, and even the fallen fruit could be snapped up and eaten. My friends and I helped ourselves. Given the crazy abundance of fruit, far more than the property owners would ever have use, no one really cared. As far as we were concerned in our own little minds, the fruit simply grew and was there for kids like us to come along and pick and eat and carry home.

It was similar when I was pastor in Weirsdale and had an orange grove in the backyard. The first row of four or five trees closest to the house were reserved for the preacher. One of them was a tangerine tree. At this time of year, you could still go out and pick fruit off the tree. I knew that there was very little done to make those trees grow and produce year after year. They had mini-sprinklers that ran year-round, and every few years needed to be trimmed back, but for the most part, they just produced delicious fruit.

The fruit produced by a fruit tree is like a gracious blessing in its apparently effortless – well, for us anyway – production of sweet, delicious orbs. It seemed to be there for the taking every year.

Our first reading comes from the Book of Nehemiah who was governor of Jerusalem, appointed by the Persian emperor around 444 BCE. Nehemiah is contemporary with the prophet Ezra who has his own volume in the Bible. Today's selection comes from an apparent sermon without attribution to either Ezra or Nehemiah. It is a confession of sins of the people of God. Our reading forms the ending of what had been a complete review of the experience of God with God's people. It was, as you can read, unflinching in its condemnation of the behaviors and attitudes of God's people as they repeatedly disregarded the Torah-Law and the ways of God.

By now, the Jerusalem Temple has been rebuilt. It is nowhere near the rich magnificence of Solomon's construction. By the time of Herod the Great before Jesus was born, the Jerusalem Temple was little improved and regarded as drab, clunky, and functional. When Herod the Great came along 40 years later, he taxed the people into destitution. However, he built a magnificent new Temple that was marveled at by all, including Jesus' disciples. But in the time of Nehemiah, the little vassal state was poor and staying that way. It was a major accomplishment simply to build what they had built, taking decades of work. It was no prize by any means, but it was better than nothing.

Their history as a people had been one hot mess for quite some time, going back to the invasion of the Assyrians two and half centuries earlier, about the length of time that the United States has been an independent nation. The result of their unfaithfulness had consequences. It showed in the corruption of their political and

economic systems, their foreign relations and military alliances, and their failure to take seriously God's intentions for their life together as a community and society.

Their confession makes it crystal clear that the sinfulness and unfaithfulness was their own doing, and that, throughout all of the ugly history of rejection of their God, their God had remained faithful to them. The punishment that they had received was deserved, and they were blessed that God had not completely forsaken them, giving up on ever imagining that God's people would truly repent of their sinful ways and become obedient to God's will and way. God could have abandoned them justifiably at any of a number of points along the way, but God's grace prevailed and God remained invested in God's people. Even now, when they have done a pitiful job in getting their faithful acts together, they know that God is ready to respond to their sincere repentance.

In our selection, the confession does admit that the punishment has been harsh, and God's people have felt the bitterness of their sinfulness and the painful consequences of their unfaithfulness. A point has been made and a level of suffering has been reached when God's people cannot deny the truth of their broken relationship with their God. This is the reason for their change of heart.

The preacher recalls the irony of how they were slaves under Pharaoh, liberated by God, given the Promised Land and its abundant harvest, and now they are slaves once again. Here is the text:

We are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

There is the fruit of the land, the harvest of abundance that God provided for God's people. In their failure to follow God's will and way, they recognize that now the fruit of their harvest is being eaten in Persia. They work for the Persians, they obey the Persians, and the harvest of their land goes to the Persians. There is nothing innocent about it, like me and couple of boys picking fruit from a neighbor's tree. The Persians are eating their fruit, the penalty for faithlessness toward God.

They will go ahead and pledge themselves to faithful observance of the Torah-Law. Maybe there is hope yet that God will liberate God's people and bring them new life.

One of the familiar lines we hear in the New Testament is the need to bear good fruit. I have just been going over the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. Both accounts of Jesus' sermon have the teaching on good and bad fruit, and good and bad trees, and that the respective fruit comes from the respective tree, and not the inverse: good fruit from good tree, bad fruit from bad tree; not good fruit from bad tree or bad fruit from good tree. Jesus teaches that you shall know the goodness and faithfulness of one who claims to be a follower of the way of the Kingdom

by the fruit that they bear. As the Sermons on the Mount and the Plain remind us, the *source* of the fruit that you bear matters.

In the passage from John 15, Jesus is talking about the vine and the branches. Jesus describes the nature of the relationship with all of his disciples, here before he is arrested, but also pointing to the time ahead when he will no longer be a living presence with them.

The image of the vine and the branches is laden with symbolism. Obviously, the vine and its fruit are indicative of grapes and remind us of the wine of the Lord's Supper. The vine is a metaphor used in the Old Testament, where Israel may be referred to as the vine planted and tended by God, nurtured and cared for in some times, trampled or uprooted in other times, like the difficult days for God's people in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. It speaks of the special relationship of God with God's people, the vine and its branches.

Jesus uses it in the same way, with God identified as the gardener, as the one who planted and nurtured the vine – Jesus – and who continues his care for the branches – the disciples – attached to the vine.

There is an obvious dependency being portrayed; the branches have **no life** apart from the vine. In this, the vine takes on the aspect of the **tree of life**. It's as if God the Gardener has planted a new Eden, or has sustained the original garden through the vine – Jesus.

The vine with the branches are planted and kept by God the Gardener for a purpose. They're expected to bear fruit. Branches that fail to bear fruit are pruned from the vine. The purpose of the pruning is to make the vine "even more fruitful."

What fruit should the vine and the branches bear? Jesus answered this question when he was challenged by the teachers of the Law about the most important commandment. He answered that the Torah-Law was summed up in the commandments to love god and to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the fruit that the vine and its branches are expected to produce. Anything that does not arise out of love does not have a place on the vine and leads to it being pruned.

Bearing fruit for the Kingdom means different things in Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew, bearing fruit for the Kingdom starts with repenting of sinfulness and then pledging to live a new life grounded in a vision of heaven and earth re-united. In that vision, love for all is lived out, recognizing sister and brother in every person, no matter their state of being, their family lines, their heritage, their nationality, their economic status or political affiliation, or any other dividing line that the worldly Powers has contrived to divide humanity and control them by manipulating their biases and differences against each other.

In Luke, bearing fruit for the Kingdom means caring and compassion for all of the least in God's creation. The poor deserve resources and support, not blame and victimization. The weak deserve a helping hand and a caring heart, not cold indifference and condemnation for not measuring up to our standards. The outcast must be welcomed and embraced, not kept out with new, bigger barriers and shunned as animals so that we can assure ourselves of our racial, ethnic, religious, and national purity.

If we cannot bear fruit for the Kingdom with wholeheartedness, then we have no place on the vine which brings new life for all. If we believe that it's more important to preserve what we have, to get what we want, to have it our way or the highway, then there is no room on the vine where love, compassion, peace, justice, and fellowship flourish in abundance to bear fruit for the Kingdom.

Those who cannot find their place on the vine are the ones who want to eat the fruit, but they don't want to bear fruit. The ones who eat the fruit from God's people are the ones who are interested in exploiting God's people, enslaving them to work for worldly Powers and masters, dismissing the teachings of the Lord and the commandments of God. Jesus promises that such soulless branches will be removed from the vine, picked up and thrown into the fire to be reduced to ashes, disintegrated so that they will do no harm to God's people any longer.

My role, our role, is simply to bear fruit, and that means showing the love of Christ, even to folks the value of whose fruit I would question. That judgment isn't mine to make. I need to be responsible for the fruit that I bear, and you the fruit that you bear, and together as a church showing the fruit that reflects the love of Christ for all. If we can produce the fruit that reflects of the love of the Lord for us, then our place on the vine will be valued, and the good blessing of the Lord will go forth from our witness.

We share today at the table of the Lord, the bread of heaven and the fruit of the vine, the body and blood of Jesus as he shared it with his disciples. As we remember the cost of love, the cost of discipleship, the cost comes from bearing fruit for the Kingdom, may we give thanks for our Savior and his gift of new life that is shared at this table throughout the world today.