

Sixth Sunday of Eastertide

John 15:9-17; Psalm 98; Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17. In John 15:1-8, with which we previously worked for the Fifth Sunday in Eastertide, we reflected on what Jesus meant when he commanded his disciples, “bear much fruit”. The church has traditionally misinterpreted that phrase to mean that Christians are to witness to our faith and evangelize. But that’s not consistent with the use of that term in either the Judaism contemporary with Jesus or with the Old Testament. To “bear fruit” meant that the “branches” were integrated into the “vine stock”, giving forth fruit consistent with that stock. If the vine was a domesticated grape stock, then the branches should give forth domestic grapes. If the vine was wild grapes, so the branches and their fruit should be the same. The chief criticism of Israel, in the use of this Old Testament metaphor, was that whereas the vine was the purest domesticated stock, the branches gave forth bitter wild grapes. They were “unfaithful” to the vine. Thus, Israel (and therefore the disciples as a “type” of Israel) was called by God to be faithful to God and obedient to the covenant. That was what it meant to “bear much fruit”.

Now, in 15:9-17, that theme continues, developing ever more fully what “faithfulness” really means. First, Jesus declares in verses 7-12 that “to bear much fruit” occurs for his followers when they “abide” in him. In other words, authentic discipleship occurs when Jesus’ followers align their wills with his will. It is the ongoing action of continuously aligning their wills with his that their faithfulness and obedience is demonstrated to themselves, to each other and to the world. They are to become “little Christs!”

To “abide in Christ and bear much fruit”, as Jesus’ followers align their will to his is not meant to be a burden, but a joy. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (vs. 11), Jesus said. In other words, life “in” Christ is not meant to be a burden. To align your will to Jesus’ will doesn’t result in grim determination. Rather, it is the exact opposite. It brings fulfillment to life, a sense of completion, a sense of being aligned with *God’s* agenda. It brings joy! It brings the joy of knowing that your life is being lived as God created you to live – as God creates all human beings to live. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever”.¹

To “abide in Christ and bear much fruit” also manifests itself as a life-style, a process rather than an end result. Jesus said, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciple” (vs. 8). The actual Greek of this passage has much more a sense of process to it than the apparent finality of the English translation. It would better be translated “My Father is glorified by your bearing much fruit and becoming my disciple”. That is, you keep on “bearing much fruit” by continuing to be obedient and ever deepening your faithfulness. And therefore, you keep on ever-increasingly “becoming my disciple”.

What is being stressed here by Jesus is that discipleship is a process, not a product. No one in this life ever fully becomes a disciple. We are always on the way to becoming disciples. No matter how deeply we abide in Christ and align our wills to his, there is the potential of going deeper still. We never plumb the full depths of Christ nor of God’s grace. There is always more,

¹ “The Westminster Shorter Catechism”, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, The Presbyterian Church [USA], 1999), Answer to Question 1, p. 175.

a bottomless “more” for us. We remain on the way to discipleship. We remain on the road of ever-increasing affinity to God and greater faithfulness to his call to us. There is always more in Christian life and Christian action.

Jesus then moves to his greatest statement in this discourse. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:12-13). These are startling words. Jesus had earlier spoken of his own call to lay down his life for “his sheep” (10:11-18). Thomas had challenged his fellow disciples to join Jesus in dying (11:16). And Peter had promised (and impetuously, because he didn’t mean it) to lay down his life for Jesus (13:36-38). But never before this in the Gospel of John did Jesus say his disciples would have to sacrifice their own lives for Jesus.

But here, the challenge now clearly stands before the disciples. “No one has greater love than this – to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends *if* you do what I command you” (vss. 13-14). And the command is, to so align your will with Jesus that you, as his disciple are to be willing to “lay down your life” both for him and for any of your fellow or sister believers! To imitate Christ means to be willing to die for his sake and the gospel’s as he is willing to die.

This is not just some sort of abstract concept. Nor is it mere rhetoric. This is to embrace the call to follow Christ all the way to a cross. To be Jesus’ “friend” is to identify with the Christ and the formation of his beloved community that operates over against Pilate’s, Herod’s or Caiaphas’ world of unilateral power, greed, exploitation and control. And such identification will mean, for every follower of Jesus, what it means for Jesus himself – rejection, persecution and perhaps even death. This is the true cost of discipleship!

Then, Jesus moves to the apex of this reflection with his “friends”. “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name” (vs. 16).

“You did not choose me, but I chose you!” Intriguingly with Judas absent (13:26-31), Jesus tells the other disciples that they were chosen by God before they chose God. They had been chosen to become “Christ-ones” to live out the beloved community, to oppose the powers of the world, and in doing so, perhaps even to die.

Jesus does not mean by this statement that his disciples had not also chosen him. Jesus is not negating their own exercise of their will. But what he is saying is that they haven’t come together by circumstance. God had carefully chosen exactly the people who would form the initial band of disciples surrounding Jesus – the band that would shoulder the responsibility of working for the political, economic, social and spiritual transformation of the world after Jesus would be taken from them. The first initiative, the original and even saving choice, had lain with God, not them. And because the disciples had been sensitive to God’s call, they who believed that they were choosing Christ found that instead they had earlier been chosen! They have chosen Jesus, and in that choosing have even chosen to lay down their lives. But in this choice, they now become aware that Jesus has already chosen and appointed them to this life and ministry!

So go. “Bear fruit”. Abide in Christ. Align your will to his. And in so aligning, discover the rich joy of continuing relationship with him. Keep on keeping on to more deeply embrace a Christ who calls you to work for the liberation of the world from the powers. And like Jesus, face the possibility of rejection, persecution, suffering and even death. Do all this in the recognition that you were chosen and called by God. And if you live your life within this understanding of your call and these instructions for living out that call, then you will “bear fruit, fruit that will last,” fruit that is manifested in “your love for one another”.

Psalm 98 describes a messenger running from the field of battle with the good news that God, that nation’s authentic king, has conquered the enemy. His message is followed by the blast of the trumpet, and the king himself approaches the city in triumphal procession. The city’s people, of course, go wild with joy, as they praise both their victory as a nation and their God!

Actually, there are three dimensions of praise presented in Psalm 98. There is, first of all, the praise that human beings, both as individuals and as a people give to God (vv. 1-3). God’s deliverance is perceived by the people as being a “new thing” deserving of a “new song”. And that “new thing” that God has done is comprehensive in scope. God has acted to bring about a spiritual transformation through his mighty act (“he has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness”), but that transformation is also political (“he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations”) and military in nature (“his right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory”). Thus, the great work that God has done in liberating his people has not solely been individualistic (although it has included this dimension), but is corporate and social as well, transforming the nation’s political and military agenda as well as its spirituality.

Second, Psalm 98 presents God’s work of human transformation not only as being praised by the people and nation (vss. 1-3). It is also praised by all the peoples of the earth. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth: break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord” (vss. 4-6).

By stating that the “joyful noise” that is to be made to the Lord is to be undertaken by “all the earth”, the psalmist is indicating that this transformation that God is doing is not for Israel alone, but is intended for the whole world. This is clearly stated in verse 3, “all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God”. Thus, what the Psalmist is presenting here is that God’s salvific work is neither exclusively spiritual nor is it exclusively intended for Israel. Rather, it is “good news of great joy for all the people” bringing shalom “among those whom God favors”.

The third level of praise moves beyond individuals, the people, Israel or even all the nations of the earth. The praise of God for God’s transformative work is also to be taken up by nature itself! “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (vss. 7-9).

Ancient Israelite thinking, like that of the nations around them, envisioned the world set upon chaos (“the roaring of the sea”) that seeks to deny or overthrow God’s dominance. But even chaos itself recognizes the great victory that has been won by God, so that just as humans have been redeemed and civilizations transformed politically, economically and socially by God’s saving work, so even nature is made new again as it becomes the world of shalom that God intended it to be.

Thus, the Psalm ends “God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity”. The world itself – both the natural world and the human-built world – will be governed with *tsedeq* (here translated “righteousness”), the Psalmist tells us. And the people will be governed with *mesharim* (translated “equity” or “uprightness”). The nations (and even nature) will be governed by the conquering monarch-God in the new world God is creating, and they will be governed with compassionate and just treatment toward the poor (the meaning of the word *tsedeq*).² And the people will be governed by God with *mesharim* or with economic equity, so that everyone shares wealth and “there are no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). This is the kind of kingdom God is creating as he conquers the forces of chaos and evil, and this is the kind of world in which he invites those who are called by him to live.

Acts 10:44-48. What was begun in Acts 8:26-40 with Philip’s witness to the Ethiopian eunuch (this past Sunday’s lectionary from Acts) reaches its conclusion in Acts 10:44-48. Here, in this story, it is not simply a Hellenist Christian but the head of the church that baptizes a Gentile (and his family). And this Gentile Christian, Cornelius, is not as ambiguous a figure as was the Ethiopian eunuch, who could either have been a Jew in diaspora or a proselyte. Although Cornelius was a “god-fearer”, he was unquestionably a Gentile – an official in the Roman army – a man who could be in no way perceived formerly as a believer (10:1-43).

That God wishes the Gentiles to be believers and to be part of Christ’s church is clearly indicated, for the Holy Spirit falls upon them *before* they are baptized and is the indisputable sign that God saves Gentiles. Peter clearly gives testimony to this by declaring, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (10:47)?

Thus, the movement developed by Luke now reaches its culmination. First, Jews not just from Judea but also from the whole known world receive the Holy Spirit (2:1-4), then the Samaritans (8:17) and now the Gentiles receive the Spirit (10:44-48). God has chosen from among all people those who are to embrace Christ for, as Peter states, “I (now) understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34-35). The Gospel is not meant only for one people, nation or even religion. It is meant for the world. And the transition of Christianity from being a sect within Judaism to becoming a worldwide faith had begun. The branches of the Christ-vine, in faithfulness and obedience, are now beginning to birth a rich harvest.

² The Hebrew word *tsedeq* didn’t mean what the English word “righteousness” means. “Righteousness” has a sense of acting in a morally upright way. On the other hand, *tsedeq* is always used of nations and people in acting ethically and compassionately toward the poor.

I John 5:1-6. The mark of the Christian according to the authors of both the Gospel of John and this first letter of John is the mark of love. Our love for each other and for humanity confirms our belief in Christ.

But here, the author of this letter suggests that the exact opposite is also true. What we believe about Christ shapes our understanding of love, he teaches. We love as he first loved us. And it is our belief in who he is and what he came to do that shapes our understanding and expression of our love. Christian love comes out of obedience to Christ and what we believe about him. And such belief is not a burden. Faith includes proper doctrine. And in the case of Christianity, faith is built upon our belief by “water and the blood” (vs. 6) – that is by Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection.³ It is through his death that we experience faith, we believe the redemptive doctrines of the faith, and by which we are enabled to love.

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³ The phrase “water and the blood” probably refers to the incident reported by John in which, during his crucifixion, Jesus’ side was pierced by the spear of a soldier and “water and blood” poured out of him (John 19:34). This proved that Jesus had truly died, and Jesus’ exposure of the wound to his disciples confirmed the reality of his bodily resurrection (20:20-27).