

FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL LIVING

Week 7: Session 6

Fruitful Living and Offering God's Love

Lent 6 Year C – Palm Sunday

Is 50:4-9a; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Phil 2:5-11; Lk 19:28-40

Gladstone 14/04/2019

1 Peter 3:13-15

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. **Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;** ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

Who would like to be part of the perfect church? Has anyone ever visited the perfect church? Sometimes it can be pretty hard to find a really good church, let alone a perfect one. So, what criteria, would you consider to be absolutely essential for a perfect church? A church that's lively, exciting, welcoming, tons of programs for adults, youth and children, lots of paid staff, lots of things happening every day of the week, where there's a real sense of belonging—no fuss, no fighting. Oh, and let's not forget that the perfect church will also have the perfect minister (which means that they would never call me to be their minister). Sometimes the search for a perfect church boils down to the fact that the perfect church would be a place where people think like me, worship like me and share my religious views.

There is a tongue in cheek chain letter about the perfect pastor that made the rounds via email and internet that has circulated all over the world.

The results of a computerized survey indicate the perfect minister preaches exactly fifteen minutes. He condemns sins but never upsets anyone. He works from 8:00 am until midnight and is also a janitor. He makes \$50 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives about \$50 weekly to the poor. He is 28 years old and has preached for 30 years. He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of his time with senior citizens. The perfect minister smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humour that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes 15 calls daily on congregation families, shut-ins and the hospitalized, and is always in his office when needed.

If your minister does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other churches that are tired of their minister, too. Then bundle up your minister and send him to the church

on the top of the list. In one week, you will receive 1,643 ministers and one of them will be perfect. Have faith in this procedure.

One church broke the chain and got its old minister back in less than three weeks....so don't break the chain.

Let's suppose, however, that there was a perfect church close enough for you to attend. What would you do? Would you worship there and even more, would you join the church? Of course, as someone once said, "If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it, because it won't be perfect anymore."

Ok, let's face it. There is no perfect church. There is no perfect minister. Sad, but true. But that ought not to stop us from seeking to follow Christ's example as we find it in this passage from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, to improve our Christian lives and exercise practices that will build up the body of Christ, the church.

At the beginning of the passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians, this morning, we read, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." Having the same mind does not mean everyone thinks alike—it means that the congregation has a single mindset which is not only centred in Christ and the good news, but looks to Christ's example as to how to live out that life.

There are three things that Paul, in reciting this ancient liturgy or hymn of the early church, points us to follow. Jesus emptied himself, Jesus humbled himself, and Jesus was obedient to God's call on his life. In the same way, and following Christ's example, we are also called to live out our Christian lives in emptying ourselves from those things that hold us back in our Christian walk—in humility and in obedience to God's call on our lives.

Here in Philippians chapter 2, Paul points to Jesus and says, "If you want to know how to behave toward another, look to Jesus. Look at what he gave up for us? He had divinity in his grasp, but he let it go. He had power and authority, but he let it go. He went so far as taking on the form of a slave. Of course, that form of a slave is, according to Paul, being born in human form. That is, he shares in our human bondage, to the point of death on a cross.

This passage reminds us that God is very aware of our realities. God has experienced our realities in and through Jesus. But the point of course, has to do with our attitude and behaviour—the way in which we live and relate to one other and to the world. To Paul

there is no better model of Christian life than Jesus Christ, himself, who chose not to exploit the power of God that was within in his grasp, but instead, to empty himself for us.

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During the past seven weeks as we have been focussing on this series of sermons and studies, on *The Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, we have learnt, if we were not already aware of it, that being disciples of Jesus Christ, we are supposed to bear fruit—both in our interior lives and in our outward attitudes and behaviours.

“Fruitfulness” provides a metaphor for many important aspects of the spiritual life and the Christian journey. In the Old Testament, fruitfulness refers to future generations, to progeny, and the promise of an abundance of heirs to God’s covenant. Genesis 1:28 commands: *“Be fruitful and multiply”*.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus says, *“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (15:8)*. Of course, here, Paul is not speaking of progeny, However, within each context, fruit, is the evidence of true faith and discipleship. Following Jesus and being fruitful are two things that are inextricably linked. Disciples bear fruit. Fruitfulness refers to the interior growth and the reconfiguration of the soul that becomes visible in outward changes of attitude, behaviour, and value. In this way, followers grow in grace.

In all cases, fruitfulness refers to what results from what we’ve received, the change wrought within us and through us by the Holy Spirit, and the impact we have with our lives. When Jesus says, *“I am the vine; you are the branches,”* he reminds us that all our fruit derive from our relationship to God in Christ. Our fruit is God’s fruit.

Throughout each of the studies, over the past few weeks, we have learnt that Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity are all practices of fruitful living. When we exercise these practices by repeating and deepening them—as we cultivate the fruit of the Spirit within us as well as grow in our capacity to serve the world for God’s purposes—we are changed, and through us, the world in which we live is also transformed.

When we live fruitful lives, others become drawn to Christ. Through our fruitfulness, we communicate the love of God, and the grace of God is offered to those we meet. As disciples of Jesus Christ, this is our mission and this mission completes us as God’s children. The church in turn fulfils *its* mission at the margins of the congregation, where those who actively follow Christ encounter those who are not part of the community of faith.

Bearing witness to Christ involves more than just people with words—no matter how well-meaning those words may be. It means living with such grace and integrity that our lives themselves become appealing to others. As the author, theologian and missionary, Leslie Newbigin states, “Live your life in such a way that people will look at you and say, ‘I want what you’ve got.’” This is a way of life that invites God to work through us. And as that happens, we are able to invite others to follow Christ and help them rediscover God’s love for them.

As we deepen the practices of fruitful living, over the coming weeks, months and years, our friends, our co-workers, fellow Christians and our families, will see us grow, providing opportunities to invite others closer in to fellowship and subsequently closer to Jesus Christ and the message of the gospel. Jesus formed his disciples with the words, “Follow me.” As we all know, this is not always easy, and there are a number of reasons for this.

Often we consider matters of faith and spirit to be so private and personal that for us to speak openly and invitationally feels intrusive. Sometimes, we feel uncomfortable with the idea that we may be imposing our values onto others—something that is frowned upon in today’s modern society. For many, the thought of inviting another person along to church or a small group makes us feel like we’re trying to manipulate them—and we all hate being manipulated. Sometimes we still have to address many of the negative stereotypes of evangelism done in less than gracious ways.

The desire to invite others has to come from a deep-rooted place inside—from a place of the unconditional love and grace that we have experienced from God, who sought and found us. It comes when we put our egos away and empty ourselves of those things that living the way God would have us live. It comes when we humble ourselves before God and one another and open our hearts to the needs of others. And it comes when we are obedient to God’s call on our lives. *In other words, the journey of offering Christ to others begins with our own personal relationship with God—and only then are we able to invite others into a relationship with God.* It is important that we understand this.

Offering Christ to others both completes us and accomplishes God’s purpose in the world. Opening ourselves to God’s grace involves opening the treasure of God’s grace to others, and inviting them in. Inviting God into *our* hearts leads to inviting *others* into the heart of God. Therefore, radical hospitality toward God becomes radical hospitality toward others. No, we may not be the perfect church, but we can be a faithful and fruitful one. As Christ emptied himself for us, so we empty ourselves for others.

To Christ our Saviour, be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.