

New Life In Christ: Bearing Fruit in a Hungry World
John 15:5-9, Col 1:1-14

Good morning! Today we are launching a new series about our New Life In Christ. Our gospel reading gives us the context-- The vine and the branches. That image from Jesus is very familiar, isn't it? Maybe it is too familiar—almost every month as we celebrate communion you hear “I am the vine, and you are the branches.” Many of you have heard it so much that it is tempting to stop listening. I want you to really hear this message—our relationship with Jesus is not at arm's length. It isn't a nodding acquaintance. Jesus invites us into the MOST intimate relationship possible. We are part of him. And the point of it is to help others! Look at verses 8 and 9 from our reading. As we remain in Jesus the Good News Translation puts it: “My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples. I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love.” Do you hear it? Jesus himself is acting in us for God's glory! That is amazing! We live in a scary, uncertain world--- and here is Jesus welcoming you to remain in his love for you. The vine and the branches is the very best news—we are united with Jesus and his Spirit works through us to help others!

Last week we talked about how sin can cut us off from God—leaving us just withered, lifeless branches. But God wants to graft you into his vine and pour his life and power and love and creativity through you so it flows out all around. That is what our New Life in Christ is like!

Both of our readings today talk about our life as bearing fruit. Bearing lots of good fruit is what our lives in Christ should look like. We live in a world that is starving for something good. Can we really provide something that satisfies that hunger? The phrase bearing fruit may sound like religious jargon, so I hope you can hear it the way Jesus' followers heard it—it is an *agricultural* image. In the middle of a desert, in a subsistence economy, Jesus told people that they would bear *much* fruit when they remain in him—when they live out this new life in Jesus. What a promise! And the person most responsible for how much fruit a plant bears is the gardener, not the plant! Bearing fruit isn't a new burden we have to carry; its a privilege that we get to live out.

This image of believers as those who bear fruit is all through the Bible. The very first psalm says that a person who delights in God's law is like a tree planted by streams of water, giving its fruit at the right time. Jesus talks about how we will bear *much* fruit to bless others as we remain in him and him in us. Paul also uses that image of the gospel bearing fruit all around the world and in the lives of believers. Bearing fruit is not about working and straining. Fruit grows naturally. The plant isn't trying really hard and fretting about whether it is doing enough. It is doing what it's made to do. Bearing fruit is a natural process, but it takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. I think it is the same with us. As we connect with Jesus, his Spirit starts working in us. As we open ourselves up to let God do what he wants, we might be surprised by what grows! But we need to be patient. Spiritual fruit doesn't instantly appear. We have to be patient, with ourselves and with God.

What is the purpose of fruit? It feeds others and it spreads seeds. We love fruit—last night we grilled some fresh peaches—amazing! Fruit nourishes and refreshes us. In the same way, the fruit that shows up in our lives feeds others. Our lives, our actions, our caring are all ways that God encourages and sustains and feeds the people around us. I can think of lots of times when I was down and someone reached out to encourage me at just the right time. A call, a note, a visit, a thoughtful gesture—those things can transform a hard time into one of connection and inspiration. Suddenly the sun seems to shine a little brighter and the future looks a bit more possible. As we live our new lives in Christ, God will make fruit appear in our lives, for the benefit of other people. Fruit is always for the benefit of others.

Throughout this series on our new life in Jesus we are going to be guided by Paul's letter to the Colossians. This is a short letter—just 4 chapters. Unlike most of Paul's letters, it was written to a church he did NOT start, in a city he probably never visited, and addressed to people he did not know. This letter is to people like US. To people who heard the gospel from people who heard the gospel from people like Paul. Today Paul gives us a quick introduction to this New Life in Jesus, which he sketches out through his prayer for these believers.

At the heart of that new life is bearing fruit—living in a way that pleases God and serves others. The fruit of a life lived close to Jesus—a life abiding in him, energized by being a branch on his vine—is what naturally grows from a life lived with God. This includes the fruit of the

Spirit that Paul talks about in his letter to the Galatians—a life marked by: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. Just hearing that list is like taking a deep breath, isn't it? You start to relax and your blood pressure goes down. Do you want *that* kind of fruit in your life? Remain in Jesus. Don't let sin cut off from true life!

Paul begins this letter with a prayer for these believers he's never met—for people like us-- his great grandchildren in the faith. First, he thanks God for them-- for the faith, hope and love they have and how the good news of the gospel is bearing fruit with them like it does all over the world. Then Paul says he continually is praying for them and lays out what our lives in Christ look like. It begins with the Spirit helping us learn God's will SO THAT we can live a life worthy and pleasing to God. That kind of life bears the fruit that Paul is talking about.

Notice that Paul is not teaching them here, he is *praying* for them. We should imitate him. Pray this prayer for yourself. Chapter 1 verses 3-14. Pray it for your family. Pray it for Pastor Chris and me and for your session. Paul thought this prayer was so valuable that he used a big part of this little letter to share it. Do you realize the power you have in prayer? Your prayers-- the prayers of a person who is in right relationship with God—are powerful. No matter what limitations or restrictions you are facing right now—from COVID, from health problems, from economic issues, whatever—you can pray. You can unleash that power! And your prayers can change the world. There are some prayer warriors in this church! I've seen it. When you pray you go before us and strengthen us in everything we do. Please, never downplay your prayers by saying “the only thing I can do is pray”—Your prayers make all the difference. Don't fail to pray, and this prayer is a great example that we can use.

Let's listen to it again, this time from the New Living Translation:

[3] We always pray for you, and we give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. [4] For we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God's people, [5] which come from your confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven. You have had this expectation ever since you first heard the truth of the Good News.

[6] This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace.

[7] You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ's faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf. [8] He has told us about the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you.

[9] So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to (for his Spirit to) give you wisdom and understanding. [10] Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.

[11] We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, [12] always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. [13] For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, [14] who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.

Amen! God's Holy Spirit gives us wisdom so we can live lives that please God and bear his fruit. As we do that, God strengthens us and gives us endurance and patience so we can be filled with joy—always thanking the Father.

Paul prays that as we live a life pleasing to God we will bear fruit in every good work—in all that we do. The idea is not that we have to add a whole bunch of “God errands” to our life, it is that as we are enlivened by being part of Jesus' vine—as we live ALL of our life in a way that pleases God-- then God's fruit naturally emerges in everything we do.

How we interact with our family, how we do our work, how we treat people at the store or down the street, ALL of it can bear that fruit that spreads the seeds of the gospel and nourishes those around us. You know this is true. The little things you do and the way you do things can make all the difference. Yesterday I was out working in the front of the house. A woman walking her dog stopped to compliment us on our yard. I always love getting credit for how great Alice is! It didn't cost this lady much to stop and say something nice, but it made my day! And I got to share it with Alice and we both could feel good. Fruit from the Spirit feeds us.

Do you see the picture? As we give God free reign in more and more of our lives, the way that we live, the way that we do things changes and blesses others. That is bearing fruit. As one of my pastors likes to say—as we live with Jesus, we will do things that make people ask questions. Questions for which the only answer is Jesus. Why did they do that? Why did they

walk during a pandemic to raise money for water for people in Africa? Why do they make sandwiches every month for people experiencing homelessness? Why do they collect food for Crossroads? Why do they drop off door hangers offering help to their neighbors? Why? Because Jesus! Jesus is the answer.

As we live our lives with Jesus, the fruit will show. As we abide in his love, we are empowered to show love to others. As His Spirit moves in us, God uses us to bless others. His fruit appears in how we act and feeds and encourages those around us.

Finally, I love how practical Paul is. He knows very well how hard a life with Jesus can be. It is NOT a promise of a pain free life, moving from success to success, enjoying the approval of everyone. Not at all! Look at how he ends his prayer—as we bear fruit in every good work, he prays that we will keep on growing in the knowledge of God and be strengthened with power. Strengthened for endurance, and strengthened for patience. Paul knows the sledding can get rough, but he knows that God is with us and will help us through all of it. Not only can we survive the hard times, but we can reframe them, remembering the hope that we have. These are extraordinary and challenging times, but they do not overwhelm our God! As God strengthens us for whatever struggles come our way, we can always give joyful thanks to God and rejoice that we have been saved from the darkness and brought into Jesus' amazing, light filled kingdom.

Friends, Jesus calls us to be with Him. We aren't supposed to be alone. We can be a branch of his vine and let *his* power work through us and bear fruit in all that we do. We can be people who bless and encourage the people around us. That is the kind of life we are called to in Jesus. Our country, our city, our world is starving right now for some kindness, for some goodness, some joy, some patience, some self-control, for some LOVE, for Good News. First Pres, we are just the people to bring it!

Let's pray—Lord Jesus—thank you for loving us. Thank you for making us part of your vine and living in us and through us. Help us to live ALL of our lives this week remembering that you are with us. We open ourselves to the power of your Holy Spirit to teach us, nudge us, encourage us and help us so that our lives are a source of nourishment and life to the people around us. In your strong name we ask it, Amen.