

SERMON: **“Being Fruitful: Practicing Faithful Growth.”**

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sun., October 31, 2010, St. James Presbyterian Church

I’m glad that you are here and that you choose to join your voice and prayers with ours this morning: you’ve picked a good Sunday – among other things this Sunday is known as Reformation Sunday, the day on which we celebrate the theological movement that gave birth to what we know as Protestantism and Presbyterianism; it is also All Saints Day, the day on which we celebrate all those who have gone before us in faith – those who were “saints” and those who merely lived their lives faithfully and fruitfully; but it’s also the third Sunday of our current series on fruitful living entitled “Being Fruitful.” So far in this series – based on Robert Schnase’s book **Five Practices of Fruitful Living** – we have covered what it means for us to be Radically Hospitable by opening our hearts/lives up to allow God into our lives so that He might plant the seed of His grace, love, and presence into our hearts. We then discussed how our first response to having made space for God into your lives for God’s grace to grow within us to for us to love God in return by practicing Passionate Worship in all we say and do as an individual of faith and as a member of a faith community.

But – as a question that was asked of me last week indicated – for some there seems to be a fairly significant gap between receiving God into your heart and praising God. How does this happen? How does something go from conception to expression – or, to use our vine metaphor, how does a plant go from implantation of the seed to bearing spiritual fruit? Well the answer is simple: expressing gratitude to/worshipping God should be the natural by-product of our living a life of faith. The problem is, if we wish to grow to become mature in our faith – if we wish to fully produce spiritual fruit, fruit that is rich and full and abundant, if we want to grow beyond mere instinctive expression (as any writer, artist, musician, our athlete knows) – we have to work at it. So, as we begin our look at how we are to grow in our faith I want to ask you another slightly less-than-Presbyterian question – a question that was asked of me during one of my Certification meetings prior to my ordination: do you believe that God talks to you? Are you open to experiencing God’s whispered promptings in your life? Put another way, if you don’t what guides you along your journey as you grow in faith – assuming you are?

Friends, just as a vine has encoded in its DNA the urge to grow – the need to reach out toward the sun, we are also encoded with the desire to grow. Describing this yearning for growing, for striving for maturity, Paul writes that we “*we must grow up in every way into [Christ].*” (Ephesians 4:15). Elsewhere, in his letter to the early Church, James squarely lays out what is expected of those calling themselves Christians; that we are to put into practice a life of faith and service – and that we are to seek only the “*wisdom from above*” which yields through us a “*harvest of righteousness.*” (James 3:17-18) Yet sadly – when it comes to growth – too many of us take our faith – our relationship with God – for granted. A landmark study on Christian Education discovered that an overwhelming majority of practicing Christians sit week after week in the pews baffled by

what they hear. And what's worse is that because they've been sitting there week after week – for years – and have reached a certain stature in the congregation, they're now afraid to admit that they're unsure, that they don't know what they assume everyone else knows, they're too embarrassed to reveal their 'secret' and end up stalled out on their journey of faith. Add to this the fact that it's become acceptable for us to drift in our faith; satisfied that we're saved we're content to be comfortable, cosseted, and unchallenged. Regardless of why, the result is the same: our practice of faithful growth lacks discipline – despite the fact that discipline is we're called to have as disciples.

But faith isn't meant to be comfortable – at least not the faith that Jesus proclaimed and called us to emulate! As seen by the Gospels Jesus' faith is anything but static: it's a journey – it's a process, a progression, a practice – that takes us from where we were, from who we were, toward becoming, developing, transforming, growing into something more, better, and more fruitful. And, like any journey/process/practice, it takes work – deliberate, conscious work: it requires us to be intentional about our desire to become what God created us to be: which is why Paul writes in the Colossians reading about the need for us to “*set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*” (Col 3:2) As Robert Schnase puts it; “*priority, purpose, consistency, persistence, and commitment make faith development intentional.... [and gives our journey direction] a trajectory, purpose, [a] path*” so that we might grow and produce fruit. (p. 70, 71) What this means is that if we're serious about our growing in our knowledge of God, then we have to commit ourselves to learning, to working at it, to making the practice of faithful growth our lifelong priority. We do it for our workouts, for our dentist appointments, for our lunch/coffee meetings, for where and when we eat then why can't we make our spiritual growth just as important, just as essential? Just as we talked about worship being a special, appointed time when we seek to meet with God – a time which we set aside to be-with Him, a time when we place God first and focus on expressing our love to and gratitude for God – we need to do the same about practicing faithful growth.

Just as we mark Reformation Sunday and All Saints Day and celebrate the heritage that we have inherited – a heritage based on the freedom to read, study, and practice our faith in ways that are accessible to all; a heritage filled with examples of men and women who lived lives of faith that bore fruit as they grew in their faith and in their putting their faith into action. And let me ask you; what did all these people have in common? What did the Reformers and those Saints we celebrate – even people like “Hellfire” Jack – share? They listened to/for God's voice and answered His call for them to grow, for them to act in faith, for them to become fruitful, participating, productive members of the vine: will you? Will you be open to God's presence in your life? Will let God guide you, walk beside you, as you grow in your faith? Will you? Your life will depend on it.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts enable us to open ourselves up to God as we seek to live fruitful lives. Amen

While we are created to grow – and we do this on our own – as Christians we learn in community because Jesus calls us together to learn because spiritual growth is never a solitary exercise. Jesus called individuals out of their lives and circumstances into a community so He could teach them through stories, parables, examples, and His actions as they spent life together. This model of learning in community became the foundation of the early Church – the Acts 2 Church is recorded as being a community that spent its time together: they gathered in their homes and at the temple to learn from the Disciples as they shared meals, worked together on tasks, and knelt side by side as they served those in need. It was through their gathering to know God together, their sharing of the love of God, and their encouraging one another that the world came to know Christ’s love and power. Individually this process of growing toward God is called sanctification – the process by which we are transformed from within by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ; collectively – as a community – it’s our becoming the Body of Christ – Christ’s ‘body’ in the world that lives out His commands to love God with all that we are and our neighbours with all that we have. But, more importantly, this process is meant to be a journey that has a direction – “*a trajectory, purpose, path*” (p. 71) as Schnase puts it – that results in our growing ***and*** producing fruit.

Eugene Peterson tells a wonderful story in his memoir, *The Pastor*. (By the way, it's a fabulous read. If you are a pastor, or were a pastor, or might be a pastor, or know a pastor, or can pronounce pastor, you should get it.) Eugene (I call him "Genie") and his wife were visiting a Benedictine monastery named Christ in the Desert. On their way to the refectory where they were to have lunch, they walked past the graveyard and noticed an open grave. Eugene asked which member of the community had died recently? "No one," he was told. "That grave is for the next one." Each day, three times a day, as they walk from praying to eating, the members of that community are reminded of what we spend our waking hours trying to forget: that one of them will be the next one.