

## INVITED TO BEAR FRUIT

Luke 13:6-9  
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Community Church, Congregational  
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Last summer, our son's girlfriend, Margaret from Italy, hosted her little sister Cicca on a California vacation. Her sister was awed by the beauty and diversity of California, and loved the long treks up to San Francisco and Lake Tahoe, and the fun adventures to Hollywood and Disneyland. It was a big adventure for two girls who have traveled all over Europe, but always under the tutelage of their parents. This vacation was all theirs, and they grew up a lot in their two weeks together. Cicca was so grateful. As she departed, she gave her big sister a small seedling in a plastic cup to say "thank you" for this time of growth they had shared together. Over Christmas, Margaret asked us to plant-sit for her little plant, which was growing beautifully in the small cup. But fast forward to spring break, and Margaret brought her plant to ask for help. Still stuck in that little cup, the plant had grown tall, but was falling over from the weight of its height. It's starting to wilt a bit, its roots cramped for space. There's no way that little plant is going to bloom this spring without a bigger planter and some digging around the dirt to freshen up the knotted roots.

Our lives of faith are just like that plant. We need space and room to grow. Our soil has to be moved around, fertilized, and even changed to strengthen and nourish our roots, so that our foundation remains strong. Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that wasn't bearing fruit. It might have been a young, new fig tree, like that little plant of Margaret's. Or it might have been a strong, established fig tree that was no longer bearing fruit. Jesus doesn't tell us if he's speaking about the ancient Judaism in which he was raised, or if he's talking about the band of followers who would soon be founding a new way of faith called Christianity. Whether our faith is brand

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new or many years old and mature, as followers of God, we are invited to bear fruit. The newest and youngest among us can bring forth fruit that nourishes and strengthens this world. The oldest and wisest among us can also bring forth fruit that nourishes and strengthens this world. We are all invited to bear fruit when the seed of faith is planted in our hearts – whether we are young in our faith or life long followers of God.

Just to be clear, the fruit of which Jesus speaks isn't really a fig or grapes or anything you're likely to find in the produce aisle of the grocery store. This is the fruit of God's word and God's love transforming our lives so that we can transform the world. Many years later, Paul will write a letter to the Galatian church to help spell out all of this fruit imagery, teaching us that this fruit we are to bear is fruit of the Spirit – fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Our lives are made different because of God's Spirit being in our lives. Our world is made different because of the different way in which we live as followers of God. And if it's not, Jesus' parable may fall on our ears as a serious warning that if we want to keep enjoying the gifts of the Spirit and the blessing of the Spirit's presence in our lives, we'd better get some gardening done in our lives of faith.

Last month, you may have had the privilege of hearing Linda Guenther preach on the Parable of the Tiller, one that some people know as the Parable of the Sower and the Seeds. Linda invited us to see ourselves as tillers of the soil, both our soil and the soil of others in our world, so that when God's word is planted in our lives and in the lives of others, it can fall on strong healthy soil that can nurture God's word to grow and expand in our lives and in our world. She challenged us to help others to bloom and grow, by being strong in our own growth and blooming as well.

These parables about seeds and plants and growth and soil are important images in Jesus' *"Invited to Bear Fruit"* ~ Luke 13:6-9 © 2018 Mary Scifres ~ [www.maryscifres.com](http://www.maryscifres.com)

teachings. They were taught when people had to plant and till and grow in order to survive, in an agrarian culture and time when many of Jesus' listeners grew their own food, ground their own grain, and produced every meal from scratch. Fast forward 2000 years, and we may not all be as aware of the amount of work that goes into that beautiful orange we pick up at the farmer's market or the grocery store. But as Margaret is learning, even growing a succulent plant from a little seedling requires some time and attention and effort.

And so it is with our lives of faith. Our faith needs time and attention and effort. Our life in the Spirit grows and flourishes *only* when we give that life of faith time and attention and effort. Otherwise, it may wilt away without proper nourishment, or fall over without a strong foundation, or go root-bound without enough expanding and changing of the soil in which we're planted. The soil of our faith is strongest when it is well-tilled. The growth of our faith is most beautiful and abundant when it is well-attended.

This season leading up to Easter is an ideal time to take a look at your life of faith, and think about where you are bearing fruit or where your fruit isn't springing forth. We are on a journey to prepare for an Easter celebration, by first going on a journey with Jesus to face the hard truth of what happened before Easter Sunday – death on a cross. This is not a journey for the faint-hearted. This is not a journey to be taken lightly. This is not a journey to go alone, nor is it a journey to travel without proper nourishment and strength for the journey.

But with strong roots, faithful companions, and well-nourished lives of faith, we can travel this journey to the cross and beyond to life in the Spirit, to lives of resurrection that are bearing the fruit of the Spirit. As you may have heard me say in previous sermons, the lenten season leading up to Easter is an opportunity to add in ways of nourishing the journey. If you haven't yet done so, there's still time.

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Do your roots need more strength, a stronger foundation? More understanding of scripture, more steadfast attention to worship, or more awareness of the traditions and community of faith of which you are apart can strengthen that foundation. If your roots are feeling weak, then come to worship next week and add in weekly worship from now through Easter; or, pick up a Bible and read a few verses each day, reflecting on what you can learn from even a verse or two; or, see me after worship and I'll lend you a hymnal so you can read through the hymns of our faith and discover the wisdom and beauty of their poetry and theology.

Do you already have strong roots that need some nourishment? If your roots are strong, but they're feeling kind of withered and bored, it's time to till that soil and mix things up a bit. Read a book of the Bible you've always avoided; listen to a style of sacred music you've never heard; or visit our church library and pick up a book by an author you've not yet read; or call a trusted Christian friend and ask where it might be time to challenge yourself to study or think or serve in a new way.

Once you know your roots are healthy and strong, think about your life of faith. Do you feel like a strong, vibrant tree of life? Do you sense you are standing tall and living faithfully? Do you know your purpose, or at least have a sense of God's purpose for you in this season of life? Are you answering God's call by living that purpose?

Look both inward and outward and really assess:

Am I bearing fruit?

Do others find in me a generous friend?

Am I loyal and steadfast to those whom I have committed?

Am I patient and hopeful, encouraging the best in others while also accepting their humanness with compassion?

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Am I making this world a better place?

Are others benefitting from my presence in their lives?

As you assess, there's no need to judge yourself. These are not easy questions. But, this is a chance to add in the nourishment you need to be as strong and faithful as you yearn to be and become. Just be honest with yourself.

Where you sense you need more wisdom and guidance about where God is calling you to go and how to live that vocatio, add in a weekly conversation with a trusted friend along with consistent time in prayer and study to discern God's guidance. If you sense you are growing, but not yet bearing fruit, invite a companion in faith to help you till your soil – join a Disciple group or form a prayer group or gather with two or three faithful friends to pray and study together; get some nourishment for your growth, ask God to show you a place where your fruit is needed, and invite the Spirit to help you bloom and grow in a way that begins bearing fruit.

If you know you've borne fruit, but you're yearning to bear more fruit or healthier fruit or even new and different fruit, add in some new spiritual practice or deepen a practice that has nourished you well over the years. If you pray daily, but never silently, add some silence into your prayer life. If you meditate and center, but never ask for anything, add prayers of intercession for the Spirit to direct your steps and show you a path toward bearing more fruit. If you've been in the same Disciple group for years, reach out to another group of church friends to seek their wisdom and input. If you've always served in one particular way, but sense there's more for you to do, start looking around, invite the Spirit to open your mind to a new perspective so you can discover how or where you may be called to bear fruit in a new way or in a new place.

Perhaps the patience you once had to show to your very small children is now needed by  
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an aging parent. Perhaps the compassion that flows easily from you when caring for a person in poverty needs to flow as easily with the cranky neighbor who has millions to waste. The world needs the fruitful, faithful presence of people like you and me in our world, each and every day. A simple smile may completely transform someone's day. A kind word may comfort a hurting friend who's never even mentioned that they're in pain. A compassionate act may prevent a suicide you'll never know about. A generous gift may be the turning point for your favorite ministry.

Imagine Jesus is in our midst, looking at us and telling us a slightly different parable. God planted a fig tree in Corona del Mar; and he came looking for fruit on it and found some. But he said to the gardener, "See here! For 75 years, I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I always find some. Do you think this is the best they can do for the next 75 years?" The gardener looks at our tree here and says, "Let's give it some attention this year. After all, it is their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a tree of life and faith, as a church. The Spirit and I will dig around a bit, till that soil with the other gardeners here, and even add some fertilizer for good measure. I bet it can bear more than just some fruit next year. Let's give it some time. I think this is a strong tree, ready for the Spirit to make it even stronger."

My friends, this is not just a parable about individuals. This is a parable about the people of God working together. We are not just individual plants, but part of a larger tree known as the church. When each of us accepts Christ's invitation to bear fruit, we make this church stronger. And when we as a church decide to bear fruit together, there is nothing the Spirit can't do through us. That's what Pentecost was all about. That's what made those Pentecost miracles possible. We can be part of similarly amazing miracles when we are nourishing our lives of faith, *"Invited to Bear Fruit" ~ Luke 13:6-9 © 2018 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com*

nourishing one another, nourishing our church, and nourishing our world.

Paul says it this way in Galatians 5:22-23, or I should say Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's words about the fruit of the Spirit this way:

What happens when we live God's way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—gifts like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things. We develop a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, but able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

This is life in the Spirit, my friends. This is the life of faith when we accept that invitation to bear fruit. So, add something in to nourish your faith in these next few weeks, and discover how beautiful and abundant your life and faith can become as you begin to strengthen, grow, and even bear fruit. One step at a time, one bloom at a time, we each can grow and strengthen as followers of Christ.

Yesterday, Margaret and B. J. found a larger pot, sprinkled some potting soil in the bottom, and pulled the plant out of its tiny cup to plant it in its new home. They helped the little plant unpack its cramped roots, loosened up the soil, and trimmed its wilted leaves. Already, the little plant is starting to perk up. And so it can be with you and with me, with just a little more attention, a little more time, and a little more tilling of the soil of our lives of faith.

Will you pray with me?

Divine Vinegrower,  
plant us in the soil of your love,  
for Christ is our vine  
and we are the branches.

In everything we say  
and in everything we do,  
help us abide in the vine,  
that we may bear the fruit  
of your love and grace.

In Christ's name, we offer this prayer and remember the prayer he taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,  
and the glory forever. Amen.