

Good Fruit
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NPMC – Feb. 13, 2022

Scripture: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Matt. 7:15-20; Gal. 5:22-23
Hymns: VT 124, 847.

Jeremiah 17:5-10, NRSV

⁵ Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. ⁶ They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. ⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. ⁹ The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse-- who can understand it? ¹⁰ I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Matthew 7:15-20

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Galatians 5:22-23

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.

A fixture of my growing up years in Winnipeg was the large, sour crabapple tree in my parents' back yard. It took up pretty much the whole yard, sprinkling it with apple blossom petals in the spring, shading it with its wide leaves in the summer, and dropping its bright-red apples down onto the grass in the fall. It was a lovely tree, with a trunk that my friends and I could easily climb up into, and sturdy branches to hold our hammock. When my mom instructed me, her studious and very sedentary child, to go play outside, I would simply take my book out and sit in the hammock under the



crabapple tree (maybe not what she had in mind, but I loved it!). Sometimes I would munch on the sour apples right off the tree, or we would make bright pink apple sauce and juice from it. It was a very generous and beautiful tree – a tree that bore good fruit.

Today's Scripture passages are similarly all about fruit – except that we

human beings happen to be the trees! These three very different passages all speak about people using the image of fruit trees, and asking a similar question: what kind of fruit do we bear? Let's dive into these texts to see what this means.

Our first passage comes from the prophet Jeremiah, one of the people trying to make sense of Israel's life and faith in the time of the Babylonian exile. This event caused a major identity and spiritual crisis for the Israelites, when their Temple was destroyed, their leaders were taken far away, and nothing made sense anymore. They had trusted in God to protect them, but the Babylonian army had defeated them. Why had God allowed this?, they wondered. And did it mean the end of their nation?

Into these doubts and fears, Jeremiah speaks these words about trees and shrubs, curses and blessings, saying that those who turn away from God will be "like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes." They will be doomed to remain in the "parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land" (Jer. 17:6). Left out there in exile in the wilderness, these people will not bear any fruit at all. By

contrast, those who trust in God are blessed to be: “like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green.” This thriving tree will be so strong that even “in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit” (v. 7-8). This tree has what it needs thrive and grow good fruit, even in the years of drought! This is a resilient tree. And in the last verse, Jeremiah discloses what he is referring to: the heart, mind, and actions of the people: “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings” (v. 10).



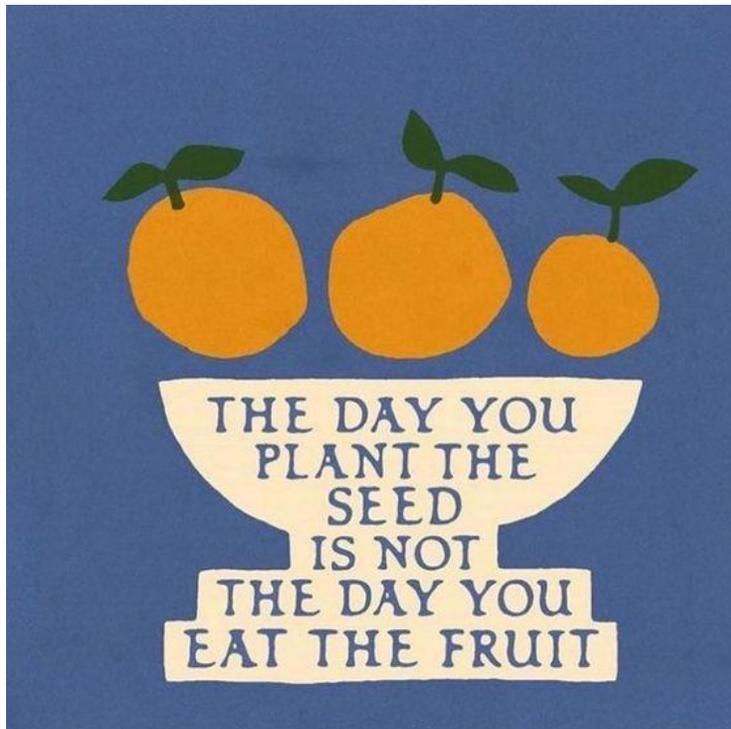
Now it might not seem like it at first, but these are words of comfort and hope! In the midst of the questioning and the fears that their faith and their way of life might be meaningless in exile in Babylon, Jeremiah assures the Israelites that God is still with them, and still a God of justice; that doing the right thing still

matters to God, that those who hold them captive won't prosper forever. It's a way of telling the people to hang onto hope and trust in God even in this time of "drought." Perhaps we can relate as we find ourselves in this "wilderness" of the pandemic. It's disorienting to continue to make our way through a pandemic without a sense of when it will end, temporarily without access to the places, people, or practices that are

meaningful to us and ground us. But Jeremiah tells us that even in times of drought, God will sustain us, and enable our hearts, minds, and actions to still bear good fruit. This is good news for the exiles, words of stubborn hope. It reminded me of a quote from Reformer Martin Luther: “If I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant new apple trees today.” This is a resilient, stubborn hope.

In our passage from Luke, Jesus also takes up this theme of people as fruit trees in Matthew 7 (part of the Sermon on the Mount). It’s another time, and an occupation by a different empire: the Romans, who have destroyed the second, rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem by the time Matthew is writing his Gospel. In other words, it’s again a disorienting time for the Jewish people and the new Jesus movement. So how are they to make their way through? How are they to know whom to believe and listen to, with so many messages and predictions being directed at them, all claiming to be God’s message for them? Jesus tells them to use their own wisdom and discernment to “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits,” Jesus says. “Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (v. 15-17). Now Jesus is sort of mixing metaphors here (are they sheep or are they figs?!), but what he is getting at is whether a given leader and their message is preying on people or doing them harm (like a wolf or a thorn) or nourishing them, giving them life, like good fruit. Like the prophet Jeremiah’s message to the exiles, Jesus is on the side of rooting ourselves in God, and of bearing good fruit. Just a few verses before this passage is the Golden Rule, versions of which can be

found in all the world's religions: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (v. 12). In other words, this fruit does not stoke our fears or diminish or disregard or take advantage of others for our own gain, but causes all of us to thrive in the love of God, ourselves, and our neighbours. This fruit gives us life even in those times of drought – exile, occupation, pandemic.



The thing about fruit, however, is that it takes time to grow. I came across this great quote: "The day you plant the seed is not the day you eat the fruit." Like Martin Luther planting his apple trees, the seeds are planted in hope – not guarantee – that they may one day bear good fruit. Their growth can't be rushed. It takes years, perhaps even a

generation. I'm reminded of the announcement a couple of years ago that a new type of apple called the "Cosmic Crisp" had been developed, and was finally ready – a process that took 20 years!¹ Good fruits take time, something that we can have trouble getting our minds around in our culture of instant-gratification.

But we still haven't spelled out what these good fruits are! Where Jesus is a bit vague, leaving that discernment up to each of us, the apostle Paul spells things out in his letter to the Galatian Christians: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50619281>

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Now this is a big ask. I don’t think many of us can say that we bear all of these good fruits all of the time! They are actually skills that take time and practice to cultivate. And they require a very specific context, as the story for today indicated. The boy in the book, *Maybe God Is Like That, Too*, noticed each of the fruits of the Spirit in himself and the people of his school, neighbourhood, and family. This wasn’t a list of attributes for one person all by themselves! Rather, these are things we practice in community with one another, supporting one another in cultivating and bearing this good fruit not as solitary trees, but as an orchard, or a grove of trees, together.

Our service today will close with the song, “You Shall Go Out with Joy” (*Voices Together* #847; *Hymnal Worship Book* #427), based on the words of another prophet of the Babylonian exile, Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 55, he presents a vision of the return from exile,² when there will be such joy that the mountains and hills will make way and the trees of the field will clap their hands! What a beautiful image of the triumph of hope, the delight of a long-awaited homecoming! It is also one that has carried people of faith through “exiles” of their own for thousands of years. May it also carry us through this “exile” of ours, until the time when our joyful reunion is at last possible. AMEN

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/return-from-exile-2/commentary-on-isaiah-551-11>