

On a recent walk, I noticed a tree that had shed all of its leaves. Science helps us know why the leaves on trees are beneficial for our environment – they help exchange CO₂ into life giving O₂ for living creatures. *Without any of our doing, that which we breathe out is miraculously taken in and transformed into that which gives us life.* Science also informs us that trees lose their outermost appendages for protection; for preparing to preserve itself for winter/dormant season. And the leaves (left to compost) replenishes the soil with nutrients, from which the tree soaks in life. We also know from science that global warming and the sustainability of our planet's environment is dependent on the health of the gift of air.

It seems like only a week ago that the leaves were changing in to a beautiful array of colors... signaling a change of seasons. And with the aid of blustery winds, many trees have shed their coats of many colors. This one tree that I observed on my recent walk was chock full of apples. It's as if the tree was *clutching* onto its fruit, holding on for the last semblance of life. Perhaps if trees embodied the human emotion of fear (and perhaps a little greed), this tree was holding very near and dear its own life fruit; its own purpose; its own gift.

This tree reminded me of an image of the Church, expressed to me in riddle form by a dear mentor long ago. And the riddle is this: *“What is the intended fruit of an apple tree?”*

(Ponder this question; and if I forget to answer the riddle by the end of today's message, honk your horn and flash your lights.)

Today as we hear as we eavesdrop on Jesus, again illustrating and describing the coming reign of God and God's realm of the beloved community, I think of this tree holding on to its fruit for dear life, and the joy it must have had in producing such fruit. I think of God's creative and abundant provision of soil, seed, water, CO₂ (through human breath) and all that the dear tree needed and then thrived. But, somehow it seems that this dear one of creation was just not willing to let go and invest its fruit for the sake of others.

I don't think I'm judging the tree nor do I see it less than part of God's beautiful creation and the cycles of dying and rising. Yet along side this tree are many other trees from which their fruits abundantly provide for often mouth watering consumption and sustenance (nutrition) for human and animal alike. And God provides for these trees as well! These fruit-bearing trees also contribute to the soil nutrient replacement and the miraculous CO₂/O₂ exchange needed for life on our planet. *Life abundant is God's gift of hope and life for all.* oo0oo

Perhaps it's common sense, but it's worth saying: When Jesus teaches, there's a point to be made – a point(s) that Jesus invites and hopes those listening *will respond*. Jesus teaches in such a way that perhaps many points and lessons shed their leaves and fruit of wisdom for those then, us now, and through out the eons.

And I wonder with you today what point or lesson might Jesus be inviting us to bring into our sights and awareness?

While this parable has often been used as a judgment about the use of money and leading us into a capitalistic view on making sure we invest for our future so that we will prosper, I don't think that the talents (or money) nor the investor of these resources are the main point. Reading the parable this way places all the responsibility on us to "get it right" and increases a sense of fear which immobilizes and defeats. While this might be good life and economic lesson, that does not sound like God's Good News or Gospel to me nor many.

I believe that Jesus – even though he and God speak more about wealth, money and the use of money than most any other topic – in this parable, we shouldn't short change nor forget that Jesus is describing Good News of the coming kingdom, God's realm.

So what Gospel tale is Jesus' spinning for us to be woven into? I think there are a couple of clues beyond the talents/money.

First, notice that **the landowner provides abundantly**. Essentially, each one of the workers is either (1) given an advance on their salary or (2) the landowner wants to keep their resources in "safe" hands while on their journey, and these three workers are entrusted with the fruits of their labor. ... If we see this landowner as Jesus, then *the gifts of abundant and eternal life are being invested and entrusted into the hands*

of beloved workers. And if we tie in the Apostle Paul's ideas on the un-quantifiable fruits of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, understanding, self-control – this parable can be seen as an invitation for God's gifts of grace being released into the care and stewardship of the hands of God's co-creators in and for life. Jesus is sharing news and gifts of abundant life – without any work or merit of ours – is Good News. (This is grace!)

Then notice, how each beloved worker addresses the landowner upon returning assessing the gifts that were given: The first two workers saw the landowner approaching and said, “**You** entrusted me with these gifts, here are your gifts multiplied.” Their proclamation “**You** entrusted me...” acknowledges the generosity, benevolence, respect, honor and trust of the gift giver. They didn't need to be told what to do. That which dwelled within them freed them to release the gifts in multiples of the original gift. To which the landowner replies, “You are a good and faithful worker... Come and share my joy.” ... As they acknowledge the Divine One who entrusts the gifts of the kingdom into their hands and hearts, into the community of God's joy they are welcome. Again, if we perceive Jesus as the landowner, then *Jesus' joy is liberated and expanded through Jesus' telling.* This is Good News.

And finally, in contrast, notice the last beloved one's address to the land owner. Rather than “You entrusted me with gifts”, this one says (in the version that I read this morning): “Knowing your ruthlessness ... and fearing your wrath, I hid

your gift; here it is, take it back.” Two things we can hear as the landowner approaches the third (1-talent) worker: (1) Grammatically, while the parable renders these phrases as “knowing” and “fearing” as the first words the worker speaks, we understand the literal phrase as “I know” and “I fear” and (or “I, knowing” and “I, fearing”) and then going on to say “I hid”. In contrast, this worker subtly turns the emphasis from the landowner (“You”) to the worker (“I”). The first words out of this knowing and fear-filled beloved one is “I”.

Rather than acknowledging the landowner (with “you”, like his companions), this worker’s “I” signals a self-centered knowledge and fear. As such, the worker distinguishes themselves as lacking respect, honor and trust in the landowner. ... Again, suggesting that Jesus is the landowner of his parable, then this beloved worker is not one who respects, honors and trusts Jesus. This worker, if you will, worships themselves... clutching onto and grasping the very life entrusted to them. The cycle of abundant life ends with this one’s “hiding”, and nourishment from God is vanquished. And as such, this beloved one turns away from the liberating and expansive joy of God’s kingdom.... into the chaos of “wailing and grinding of teeth”... where there is no good news.

Dear Church, the Good News comes near and in us as Jesus’ Holy Word of grace liberates and releases the gifts of abundant life. Even – and perhaps especially – during this time of polarizing politics, racial reckoning, lingering loneliness, disease of mind and body, deep seeded fears, and everything

that unsettles us, Jesus comes to us... Jesus teaches, embraces and enfolds the beloved community and kingdom of grace with God's Spirit of joy so that we may respond with honor and humility towards God/Jesus... so that we may respond with **"You** entrusted all things to us, God/Jesus."

And through Holy Baptism and Communion, joy resounds God's promises and grace washes, takes-in and saves us from ourselves and for God's abundant life to feed and nurture God's beloved global and local community. Dear Church, trusting and living in the joy of Jesus, God's Spirit is continuing to miraculously (re)form us as co-creators with God --- and by God's grace, the fruit of faith, hope and love grows and is expressed through you and me for others.

As God's beloved, fruit-bearing and faith-nurturing community – who are invited again – to trust in the Spirit of the Risen Christ, may God's perfect joy continue to fill our hearts so that as we are also liberated by the love and hope of Christ Jesus... we may entrust that Jesus is releasing these fruits of God's Spirit of abundant life for others *through you*.

Trusting in Jesus' joy and hope, we journey together.
Amen.

(wait for honk or flash...)

What is the intended purpose of an apple tree? ... an orchard.

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