

Fruitful Ministry

John 15:1-17

What Did You Expect?

Why did you come on this retreat? What did you expect? Some our expectations were teaching, fun, time with friends, etc., Those are good expectations and I think they are largely being met this week. But the focus of this retreat has been to prepare for RUF ministry this year. So what do you expect of RUF this year? Good teaching, friendship, fun, etc.? Those are good expectations, too – and I hope they also will be met. Do you expect RUF to change? To grow? To be fruitful?

Some churches and campus ministries place a high value on growth, and they pour a lot of energy and resources into reaching out to others and coaxing them into their group. They measure success by the number of new members and the size of their ministry – and they plan events, secure facilities, produce materials, and create performances that will attract people. Other churches and ministries declare that God calls us to faithfulness, not to numbers. They pour their energy into teaching and doctrine and caring for the people already in their group. They measure success by the depth of knowledge in their people and the quality of their relationships. They pour their resources into teaching, caring for each other, and serving their community. In tonight's scripture we see Jesus talking about neither numbers nor nurture. Jesus talks about fruit.

Christ Expects Us to be Fruitful

We might have expected Jesus to say that if you want to be His disciple, you must bear fruit, or to command those already His disciples to bear fruit. But there is no such command. Fruit is an expectation of Jesus' disciples. Every follower of Jesus bears fruit. Everyone who does not bear fruit is not a follower of Jesus. Some people may do wonderful things, some may say the sinner's prayer, some may claim to follow Jesus, some may even be leaders in the church – but if they bear no fruit, those are fraudulent claims. Disciples bear fruit.

Jesus uses a vine to illustrate this. A vine has branches, and they bear fruit. That is what branches do. All of them. If there had been a branch which did not bear fruit, it was cut off and is no longer in the vine. All the branches in the vine bear fruit. So all followers of Jesus bear fruit. This is a given, and anyone who claims to follow Jesus but does not bear fruit is making a fraudulent claim.

Well then, what is fruit? In light of how central fruit appears to Jesus' ministry, it is curious that Jesus makes no effort to define it. This has not stopped His followers over the centuries from dogmatically declaring what fruit is. Some leading ideas about fruit are conversions, service, and character. Why would Jesus say not a word about the nature of fruit? Apparently Jesus thought it was obvious.

The central idea in this passage is the attachment of the branches to the vine. Now these branches would be vine branches. They are not tree branches, or shrub branches, or bean branches. The common vine in ancient Palestine was the grape vine, and grape vines produce grape branches. Grape branches produce grapes – not figs or olives or walnuts. So if we are branches and Jesus is the vine, apparently we produce the same fruit that Jesus produced. Did Jesus minister to huge crowds, or only to a few close followers? Did Jesus go out of His way to bring relief to the poor and sick, or was He too busy in “ministry?” Did Jesus live a life of godly character, or were the huge crowds all that mattered? If we are true branches of Jesus the true vine, we will produce the same fruit in ministry that Jesus produced. Most of the arguments about fruit are a foolish waste of time, and are sometimes engaged to excuse the laziness and callousness of the ministers. If we are followers of Jesus we should look like Him and our ministry should look like His. Numbers and service and character and other godly interests are *all* part of the fruit of the true vine.

What does this mean for RUF at West Virginia University? It means that we can expect this ministry to grow larger, to care for hurting people, to exhibit godly character, and look increasingly like Jesus in every way. Perhaps someday there will be 100 or 200 people in RUF. Maybe 500! RUF will care for addicts and failures, those depressed and abandoned, impoverished and lonely international students, students caught in a vicious cycle of sin and destructive habits, etc. RUF will be a close-knit community which eagerly welcomes everyone into its fellowship. RUF will be famous all over campus as a people of steely convictions and soft hearts, industrious and generous, high moral standards yet compassionate on sinners, always talking about Jesus yet never looking down on anyone. These are the sort of things we expect of this ministry. This is *absolutely* what we expect of this ministry. This is what we expect this ministry to grow toward this year.

And here you are, many of you leaders in RUF, and now you have these impossible standards to live up to. This is not what you signed up for. This is not why you came to RUF, and you did not come to this retreat to have this load of responsibility dumped on you. I am confident some of you are feeling this way, because you unconsciously mis-heard what I said. I said this is what we expect, and you heard this is what you must do.

Christ Makes Us Fruitful

Did you notice that there are only three commands in this long passage? Jesus commands us to abide in Him (v. 4), to abide in His love (v. 9), and to love each other (v. 12). Jesus never commands us to be fruitful. When I say that we expect RUF at West Virginia University to be fruitful, that is not an implicit demand that you get your act together and work harder. I am making a prediction, not a suggestion. I predict that RUF at West Virginia University will be gloriously fruitful, not because of your hard work and godliness, but because of Jesus. Jesus is here. Jesus is the true vine, the fruitful vine. Jesus declared that He would build His Kingdom and that nothing could stop it. You will be fruitful in ministry because Jesus is fruitful and He will make you fruitful. Our confidence in the future of RUF here is not in you or your pastor. Our confidence is in Jesus who is always fruitful and will make you fruitful.

The key is abiding. We are healthy to the extent that we are connected to Jesus. I love plants and have them in the house and in the garden. If you have a beautiful houseplant and your toddler tears off a branch, what happens? It shrivels up, dries out, and dies. I can water it, feed it, talk to it, love it, but nothing will make this branch fruitful. I will have to burn it. If I am weeding the flower bed and I accidentally pull a branch off a marigold plant, it will die. No amount of apology or regret will help. You know why this is the case. The branch gets its food and water from the main plant. That is the only way the branch can be nourished. I am the glorious image of God, but I cannot do for this helpless branch what the stalk will do. Only the vine can keep the branch alive. And as the vine delivers water and minerals to the branch, the branch grows and flourishes, flowers and bears fruit. The branch does not have to do anything. It does not have to go fetch the watering can, or fertilize itself, or turn on the lights. The branch does nothing. And as long as it sits there in the vine it is fruitful.

Likewise, as you remain connected to Jesus you will be well-fed, grow strong, flourish, and bear fruit. It is not up to you to create a ministry. It is not up to you to convert sinners, to encourage the dispirited, to get more people into your group, to sanctify immature Christians, to teach the ignorant. Jesus does these things. Jesus is the One who builds the church, not you. But if you are attached to Jesus, you will be right there while Jesus is doing these important works. You will speak, you will give hugs, you will pray, you will lend a hand – but Jesus is the One doing the work. You are His physical agent, but He is the laborer. Furthermore, you will grow stronger and stronger. Did you ever notice that although a tree produces fruit each year, it never

shrinks? The work of producing fruit does not tire the tree. Even as it bears fruit each year, the branches grow larger, stronger, and healthier. So also with you. The more ministry you do, the healthier you become – if you are abiding in Jesus. If Jesus is doing ministry and you are along as His partner, ministry will be fun, exciting, and nourishing even as it is often tiring and exasperating. But if you are doing ministry on your own – without Jesus – you are a dead branch trying to produce fruit. Not only will you fail, but you will kill yourself in the process.

Abiding in Christ

If abiding in Christ is the vital key to ministry, even to the whole Christian life – how do we do this? How can we remain connected to Jesus? The first step is to get connected, and baptism is what connects us to Jesus. If you have never been baptized as an infant or an adult, you are not part of Jesus yet. Speak to Peter or your pastor and arrange to be baptized soon. If you have friends who believe in Jesus but have never been baptized, urge them to speak to a pastor also.

To stay connected to Jesus we must be with Jesus. Jesus is present in scripture, in prayer, and in the sacraments. The Bible is the word of God – that is, the word of Jesus. Jesus may instruct or encourage, or rebuke you through the words of men and women, but when you read the Bible, Jesus speaks to you directly. Jesus is also with us when we pray. People make prayer unnecessarily complicated. Prayer is simple. It is a conversation with God. When you address God, Jesus is right there with you. And Jesus stays with you no matter what you say. It is a good thing to learn how to have a mature conversation with your professor or your father or with God. But your father will listen to you even if you are spouting nonsense, and so will God. Sometimes when you read the Bible you may have the sense of God speaking directly to you. Sometimes when you pray you may sense God right there beside you. But many days you may read the Bible and pray and not feel any different for having done so. That does not mean God was not there. It simply means your feelings did not grasp reality. Live by the promises of God, not by your feelings. Someone said, “Seven days without the Bible and prayer makes one weak.” Although you may not feel stronger each day you read the Bible and pray, God is silently at work in you making you stronger and healthier. You are becoming a strong and fruitful branch.

Jesus is with us in the sacraments. Baptism is not an awards ceremony in which we declare our faith in God and are congratulated for this great feat. Baptism is a work of God in which through His authorized representative God claims us as His own child and gives us His name. The minister pours the water, but Jesus is present to claim you as His brother. The Lord’s Supper is not merely a memory aid, as though we might forget that Jesus died for us. The Lord’s Supper is a feast in which we eat and drink with Jesus. Jesus is present as the host and Jesus is present in the bread and wine. We are with Jesus and Jesus comes into us in the Lord’s Supper. And just as bread and wine strengthen our physical bodies, so Jesus strengthens our souls in this sacrament.

Jesus is with us most prominently in worship on the Lord’s Day. Nothing takes the place of Sunday worship. The point is not the teaching or the singing or the prayers or the fellowship. These are all important, but of course these are offered in Bible studies, RUF meetings, conferences, etc. However, in none of these events is Jesus present the way He is in Lord’s Day worship. When Jesus’ authorized representatives on the day dedicated to Jesus announce the beginning of worship, heaven opens and we spiritually join the heavenly host around the throne of God. Hebrews 12:22-24 describes what happens on the Lord’s Day when we assemble to worship. Notice the perfect tense:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Jesus speaks from the throne when the scriptures are read and the gospel is preached. Jesus feeds us as we eat and drink the bread and wine. We join the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven when we sing. This is reality even in churches where the facilities are poor, the preaching is clumsy, the singing is out of tune, the people are weird. Wherever the scripture is read, the gospel is proclaimed, prayer is offered to the Triune God, and the sacraments are present – Jesus draws us into heaven and we worship with the angels. Sometimes you may not feel especially inspired, but that is not a problem with the worship. That is a problem with your feelings.

If we would be with Jesus, we must go where He is. On the Lord's Day Jesus is in the worship assembly, but the rest of the week Jesus is out in the world caring for His people and calling sinners to repentance. Abiding in Jesus means going with Jesus out into the world. Here Jesus used another image to communicate who He is and what He does. Jesus is a shepherd. Jesus cares for His sheep. He feeds and protects and comforts them. Jesus gathers His sheep into the church, and He goes out into the world looking for lost sheep. Jesus leaves the comfort and safety of the sheep pen and goes out into the dark and dangerous places of this world looking for His sheep. He finds them and carries them home. Those who abide in Jesus likewise go out into the dark and dangerous places of this world looking for lost sheep. For some Christians that means going into Iraq and Afghanistan to proclaim the gospel in the midst of people who will kill you for doing so. For some that means preaching in China until they are imprisoned. For others it means bringing the love of Christ to drug addicts and homeless people. Some of the darkest and most dangerous places are where the wealthy and powerful hang out. Jesus is in all these places, pleading with the lost to cease rebelling against Him and come into the safety and joy of His Kingdom. Christians are not alone among hopeless poor, in prison, or in death. Jesus is there. Jesus is with them as Christians abide in Him.

For you abiding in Christ may mean going into the dark and dangerous places of your friendships – telling your friends the good news of Jesus' Kingdom. It may mean spending time with someone who needs help but is not your kind of person. It may even mean leading a Bible study. If you abide in Christ, He may lead you into places you never thought you would go. It may be difficult. It may be frightening. But Jesus will be with you, and you will be fruitful. Jesus will make you fruitful because He is producing fruit through you.

We Can Expect to be Extremely Fruitful

We are already connected to Christ. Baptism accomplished that. We will inevitably produce fruit as that connection remains healthy. You will have a flourishing ministry. RUF will grow and prosper. There will be occasional times of stress and exhaustion, but you will grow stronger and healthier and more joyful as you stay connected to Jesus and as that connection grows stronger. But there is more. God will not settle for a merely fruitful vine. Our extravagant God will have a massive fruit crop. Twice in this passage Jesus declares that we will bear *much* fruit, and He concludes by promising that our fruit will remain. Jesus is not going to settle for mediocre followers. If you thought that you would give Jesus a little obedience, just enough to satisfy Him, but not become a fanatic, you are badly mistaken. There are no branches that bear small fruit on this vine, and none that bear short-lived fruit. If small, perishable fruit is what you are after, you are in for a big surprise. Jesus is going to produce big, eternal fruit in you, whether that is your desire or not.

The way you get big fruit is by pruning the vine. I grow tomatoes in my garden. Tomato plants branch out in all directions as they grow. If you allow this to happen, you will end up with a lot of small tomatoes. But you can get large tomatoes by cutting off the suckers, the side branches. This concentrates the energy of the plant into the main branches, and they produce big fruit. Jesus says that God produces big fruit in us by pruning us. Just as I cut off those side branches which siphon off the energy of the tomato plant, God will cut out of your life those things which make you less fruitful. Tomato plants do not feel pain, so cutting off the suckers does not cause anguish to the plant. But men and women do feel pain, and in case you were thinking that pruning sounds painful, you are right. Perhaps you spend too much time playing a video game or on Instagram. God may arrange to remove those from your life. Perhaps you have an unhealthy relationship with money, or food, or exercise. God may cut those out of your life. Perhaps you are pursuing a romantic relationship which is fun but unproductive. God may bring that to an end. The list is endless of things – both good and bad in themselves – which can hinder your fruitfulness. God is patient. He has your whole life in which to do His work. But God will inevitably root out those things which limit your fruitfulness. Maybe you thought you would be a moderate Christian, but God is going to make you a massively fruitful Christian.

“But why can I not be just a little fruitful?” you say. “Others can be the big success stories. I am satisfied with small success.” That might be what you think you want, and that might sound good to you – but it is not good for you. Jesus’ desire for you to be massively fruitful is not so that He can squeeze the maximum productivity out of you so that His Kingdom will grow larger. It is for you. In verse eleven Jesus explains why these things are so. It is so that we can be full of joy. Jesus will not be satisfied with a little happiness here and there. Jesus will bring you joy – that overflowing excited contentment deep in your soul that makes happiness look like a cup of warm water compared to an ice cream sundae. And not just joy, but overflowing joy. That is Jesus’ design for you. That is why He will make you massively fruitful and that is why He will subject you to the short-term pain of pruning.

All this takes a lifetime and we will spend eternity telling each other tales of the astonishing work God did through us while on earth. But often in one year you can see the results of Jesus’ pruning in greater fruitfulness and increasing joy. Let’s pray that, by God’s grace, when we reconvene at Summer Conference at the end of this year, we will tell each other stories of the amazing fruit God produced through us.

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