

I

During the long summer of 2020, when it had become apparent that the two weeks to flatten the curve of the pandemic would stretch considerably longer, our family decided that we would grow our own tomatoes in our back yard. I've never been much of a gardener, but with no sports or other distractions to occupy our time or our minds that summer, we dove in. Our sons were still pretty small then, but the whole family pitched in to get that garden put together. I spent a small fortune at the hardware store on tomato stakes and lumber to make some raised beds. (Remember lumber prices that summer?) Amy even took some soil over to the university to be analyzed. We tried to do it right.

Every day, we watered and weeded and fussed with that garden, working our way carefully past the Joro spider webs. And lo and behold, by late summer, we were enjoying fresh cherry tomatoes on our salads, picked from our very own backyard. I didn't keep a spreadsheet, but I conservatively estimate that we produced those tomatoes at the low low price of eleven billion dollars per pound.

II

But you don't have to have a degree in horticulture to know that it takes a heap of work to get a garden started. It takes attention and care and love, not just for a morning or a day, but consistency over the long haul, to produce anything worth harvesting.

In that way, I think, gardening is a lot like baseball. In baseball, a player might have a good game, or a good series, or even a good season. But it's the players who can produce consistently over the long term who are remembered long after their careers, or even their lives, are over.

All of us over a certain age can name mentors and teachers and leaders who shaped us, women and men who may not ever be household names, but who nevertheless are enshrined in our own Halls of Fame, because of the consistency with which they produced over the long term.

And so what is it that we are endeavoring to produce as people of faith? Is it juicy tomatoes? Is it a .300 average? What are the fruits of our labors, the evidence of our daily commitment to following Jesus in a world that seems to grow crazier and more choked with weeds by the day? These questions and more are addressed this morning in our reading from the Book of Galatians.

III

As we said last week, Galatians isn't a book at all in the traditional sense, but rather a letter written about 15 years or so after Christ's death and resurrection. The letter was written by a man named Paul and was addressed to a fledgling community of Christians in a region of the modern-day nation of Turkey known as Galatia.

In those early days, as the good news about Jesus was spreading from Jerusalem and out to the ends of the earth, the gospel, which of course has its roots in first century Judaism, started bumping up against other religions. And the first followers of Jesus, all of whom had been born and raised as faithful first-century Jews, made a startling discovery. People who had come of age in other religions, were nevertheless, by the power of the Holy Spirit, coming to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the Messiah, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny come together.

And they wanted to know, what's required of me? What must I do to show that I am a Christian?

Remember, the Christian faith has its roots in first century Judaism. Jesus, and all of his first disciples, were born and raised as first-century Jews. And so as these Gentiles, as non-Jews were called, were coming to believe that Jesus is in fact the Savior, the first Christians assumed that the Gentiles would need to undergo all of the requirements found in the Hebrew Scriptures, including the requirement that all males be circumcised.

And again, I don't need to explain any further, because you can see the obvious tension. The Gentiles were really interested in showing that they were Christians, but this seemed like a big ask.

And so a debate started in the early days of the church about what to

do about these Gentiles. And in the 15th chapter of Acts, we read that the leaders of the early church called everybody back to Jerusalem, and they read Scripture together, and they prayed together, and they listened intently to one another and for the voice of the Spirit. And in the end, they decided that baptism, rather than circumcision, would be the mark of the Christian covenant for men and women and Jews and Gentiles alike.

But that one meeting and one policy decision did not settle the debate once and for all. Up to the north, in Asia Minor, in a region called Galatia, it appears that the circumcision debate was still a live topic among the first century believers. And so the Apostle Paul, who had visited the region previously on one of his missionary journeys, sits down to write a letter to the Galatians to address this and other controversies. And that letter has been preserved and handed down to us and has come to be known to us as the Book of Galatians.

And the live question that Paul seeks to address in the passage this morning is one of production – what is the external evidence that one is a follower of Jesus? And to get at that question, he turns to a metaphor. So listen now for a Word from God from Galatians 5:16-26.

16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is

opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

IV

In the gospel of John, Jesus said, I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

In other words, my friend, that's your job – to bear fruit that will last. You are in charge of the kind of fruit that you will produce and bring into the world. This is what you were made to do. Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them."

So let's explore that metaphor a little more, shall we? Fruit trees tend to bear fruit that looks and tastes a lot like

the fruit of the other trees around them. Trees that bear sweet, juicy oranges, are usually found in close proximity to trees that are known to bear sweet, juicy oranges. And by the same token, trees that bear sour, dry fruit are often found near trees that are known to bear sour, dry fruit.

My friend, think for a moment about the company you keep. Think for a moment about the people with whom you choose to spend time. Think for a moment about who you follow on social media. Think for a moment about your media consumption habits. Those things have a far greater influence on the kind of fruit you produce in the world than you know. And so be mindful of the company you keep. Be mindful of how and where and when you choose to consume media and information.

By the same token, fruit trees in orchards tend to produce more and better fruit than trees off by themselves. For starters, when storms inevitably come, fruit trees in orchards, because they're in orchards, naturally help each other knock down some of the wind, and they bear the load together.

My friend, that you were made to be in community. This path of discipleship is not an easy one. The gate is narrow and the path is rocky, said Jesus. Many have tried to walk it by themselves, and all have eventually failed. Like baseball, there are individual acts of discipleship, to be sure, but it's fundamentally a team

sport, and no one can do it alone. You need us, and we need you.

And finally, don't forget that that tending the roots of a fruit tree is essential for healthy production over the long term. You can't just dump pour a bucket of water once and expect it to be magic. You can't just dump a load of fertilizer on Monday and expect fruit on Tuesday. It's the daily watering and feeding over time that generates production.

And it's those daily habits of discipleship that make the difference, my friend. So what are your daily discipleship habits? Are you praying every day? Are you attending to the work of the Holy Spirit in and through you? Are you spending quiet time, reading Scripture, reading a devotional or listening to a podcast?

It's not easy to do. It takes work. It takes intentionality, because it won't happen by itself. To the best of my knowledge, cherry tomatoes do not grow in the wild in the woods of Clarke County. Even if they did, the weeds and the deer would get to them before we ever did.

It's that daily commitment over time, friend, that will produce the things you most want in your life, that your friends and family and colleagues and coworkers most want for you: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control.

V

I don't know about you, friends, but every time I turn to the news these days, I feel like I have to take a deep breath and brace myself.

The world out there has had more than its fill of enmity. The people out there have had all of the strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, and strife that they can use.

The people out there, our family friends, our colleagues and coworkers, even strangers on the street, they're longing for just a taste of Christ's love. They're craving a little slice of joy. They're longing for the kind of peace that passes all understanding.

But as the 12 steppers say, you can't give away what you don't have. So what kind of fruit are we producing as a community of faith?

On this Day of Pentecost, friends, may we remember that we have been called, we have been claimed, we have been marked, we have been given the Spirit of Christ in our hearts, that we may go and bear the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control.

We have been called, we have been claimed, we have been filled with the Spirit, to bear good fruit that will last, to the glory of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.