

## Heaven's Secrets: Fruit Bearing

Someone asked me last Sunday, "Do you believe our church is in trouble?" I thanked her for asking, and she said, 'A lot of people are wondering it, I just am not afraid to ask you.'



Well, I am glad she asked. Let me explain. Last week I got about two-thirds of the way through my prepared text and suddenly my brain took off on me. I was left with Jill sitting on the steps in prayer. Thank you to those of you who prayed with me here or at home.

But from that place of emotional exhaustion and repentance for my sin comes this sermon, my answer to the question, "Pastor Bill, do you think our church is in trouble?"

Here is my short answer: No. Not yet.

Then why the strange sermon ending and call to prayer?

That takes a longer answer.

I became complacent in my work for the kingdom of heaven. I allowed the excuse of 'safe-distancing' to feed my natural inclinations as an introvert to hide from

people. I was satisfied with the status quo. We worshiped, I preached, people connected virtually. Enough, I persuaded myself.

That is not fruit bearing. Each disciple of Jesus is given a burden to carry, to use C.S. Lewis' phrase, 'the weight of glory'; the burden of working for kingdom growth even, or especially, when circumstances are difficult and the environment is not friendly toward Christ's Church. God calls us to do the hard work of bearing fruit that Jesus can harvest when he comes again in glory. This I was failing to do and worse, failing to lead this church to do.

How did we get to this point? We are at a crisis moment in the life of the North American Church.

Todd Bolsinger, a seminary professor specializing in leading church change, recently said this:

"There are two phases to a crisis. First is the acute phase, where you're just trying to survive; this is like a body going into the emergency room. The second phase is the adaptive phase, where you actually use the energy of the crisis to address the underlying issues. As soon as the acute crisis is over, most people want to go back to what's familiar.

This (pandemic) is the crisis moment. The question is, will we adapt? Will we help people get through the acute moment with the understanding that the reason for surviving is thriving, and thriving is going to require your growth and change?"

So, that brings us to Monday morning, when I turned to today's text. Now, if you believe that the Bible accurately reports what Jesus said, then these words contain a most significant warning for modern-day Christians: ***"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."***

The question we all must squarely face is a straight-forward one. *'Am I producing fruit for the kingdom of God?'*

If that is the measure of my performance as your Pastor, at least in God's eyes as the owner of the vineyard we are called to harvest, then, frankly, I am terrified. Terrified because if we do not change and grow then we stand in danger of the owner coming to take from us this vineyard we are blessed to care for and give it to another tenant.

Listen to John Calvin:

"Now as our minds ought to be struck with terror by the threatening of Christ, that those who have profaned the kingdom of God will be deprived of it,..."

Wait a minute, John. Deprived of the kingdom? I *was* terrified. Not because we are a church in trouble but because I think I and we, Hope Church, along with most of the Church in the U.S., are quickly approaching a precipice in our journey. We are not so many steps from walking right over the edge of the cliff and falling headlong into the abyss created for former tenants of the vineyard's owner. We are at a time when we need to turn around, that is repent, and head back into the proverbial vineyard to produce fruit for the owner.

May I be clear here by emphasizing that this is not to say I fear that I, or we, are in danger of losing our salvation. That is not what terrifies me. We have an assurance of our salvation that is built on a rock-solid foundation of the Cross of Christ. What terrifies me is that, having been offered the opportunity to work in this vineyard and to produce fruit for the owner, fruit we are called to bear until the owner arrives to take the harvest home; what terrifies me is that I have allowed the crisis of the pandemic to lead a church to the precipice. That is, unless we turn ourselves around with a renewed commitment to worship and service, then we are in danger of losing our lease.

We fell victim, with so many others, to the traps of the times. You know these traps:

1. Just wait, everything will get back to normal. No, it won't. If we wait for everything in the church to go back to the way it was on March 1 then we will never get back to being the church.
2. Just wait, soon there will be a new normal. No there won't. Not soon anyway. We are in a state of great flux, a new reality being created almost daily. We need to be positioned to adapt our work of bearing fruit, turning on a dime.
3. The church is closed, so there is nothing for us to do. No, that is the most deadly of all the mistakes for which I repent. The *building* is closed but the *church* must continue to bear fruit.

Calvin admonishes me, as your Minister of Word: "We who preach and teach and lead God's people are called always to repentance and renewal and to tireless testing of our preaching against the gospel given for us in scripture...."

So today I declare the Good News: though the *building* remains closed, the *church* is open! The *church* is open, and we are not waiting for the old normal or the new normal. The *church* is open and we are ministering in the present reality, whatever it is, to produce fruit that honors God and bears abundant fruit in this vineyard.

Today I pray, 'Father, your kingdom come!' What are we asking the Father to produce as the Father brings the kingdom of heaven to the earth?

First, it means personal transformation. Transformation that teaches us to forgive, to be generous, to repent.

Second, it means that we call on God to preserve and grow his church. Just because the building is closed doesn't mean the church cannot grow. We just need to learn how to adapt our ministry to the new and ever-changing reality.

People are still searching for God, albeit not in church sanctuaries. Churches that bear fruit will need to be able to see that the vineyard needs to have a virtual front door and a physical front door. Growth must happen through multiple venues, reaching multiple audiences, that are multi-lingual and multicultural.

What can you personally do to help us bear fruit in this vineyard we serve? What does it mean for you, as Consistory members, to make a renewed commitment to serving God's church? What does it mean for the people who hear this message to commit to personal transformation and inviting friends through our front doors? We can all pray, "Your kingdom come", but what are you willing to do to make that a reality for the vineyard's owner, so he won't need to tear up our lease to work this vineyard?

And that petition has a third implication: that we understand who it is that we are battling. I am probably old-fashioned in this, but I believe that the Evil One, Satan, the Devil, is a real spiritual enemy. We are up against it. The Devil is using this time of malaise to make us so comfortable in our easy chairs that the chances of us getting up and getting back to work producing fruit diminishes by the day. I know that we cannot open up the old programs now. I get that. I support that decision. But, frankly, how do we know the old programs and meetings will ever happen again as they did before? What is the post-crisis way to bear fruit?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, said this about challenging times:

“This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.”

I am inviting you to join me in these next months in discovering what to do with this time. We have a wonderful head start with our 2020 Vision of Hope Recommendations. Will we get to work discovering new ways to bear fruit, or will allow our fear and new-found comfort to produce a malaise borne out of complacency, paralyzing us from being able to bear fruit altogether?

Let me assure you of some good news to conclude. The kingdom of heaven is not going away. The vineyard will produce fruit. Christ is going to bless the tenants who are fruit bearers. As Calvin writes,

“...Christ assures us that though the ungodly destroyed the worship of God among themselves they would never cause the name of Christ to be abolished, or true religion to perish; For God in whose hand are all the ends of the earth, will find elsewhere a dwelling and habitation for his kingdom. We ought also to learn from this passage, that the gospel is not preached in order that it may barren and inoperative, but that it may yield fruit.”

‘Pastor, do you think Hope Church is in trouble?’ No, friend, not yet.

I think Hope Church has an amazingly brilliant future if the Spirit will use me to preach a gospel that is not barren and inoperative, but rather invites and encourages you, my brothers and sisters, to shake off the weight of fear and take up the weight of glory, bearing fruit that will fill the Owner’s storehouses to overflowing.

To the vineyard, friends!