

## Trinity VIII (21 July 2024)

“Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”

+In the Name...

On some Sundays, the Bible readings seem designed to make us feel better: not necessarily about ourselves or because of anything we do or have done, but because we are the children of Almighty God through his Son Jesus Christ. We have been adopted into the family, as St. Paul told the Church in Rome as we have just heard. That is the good news. Most of the rest of what we have heard this morning is not so good news. Maybe that is not the way to word it: we get reeled in with, “You are part of the family now. Welcome!” but then we get “the rest of the story” to quote Paul Harvey. (More on him shortly.)

Indeed, we are grafted into the Body of Christ at our baptism, and we embrace that relationship and accept that for

ourselves at confirmation, as we witnessed last week. But as the over-used saying goes, “Life is not a spectator sport.” I disagree: I think there are a great number of people who do as little as possible in life, just watching it go by and not taking an active role unless they absolutely have to. The Christian life, however, is not a spectator sport! As St. James says, we are to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. Nor can we just mosey along with the crowd, especially the hedonistic secular crowd of today’s world.

St. Paul warns us this morning not to live after the flesh. Of course, many minds will assume he means sins of a sexual nature. Undoubtedly those are included, but what he is really saying here is not to live just for oneself. We used to be slaves to our sins. Now we are not slaves to God, as the relationship has changed: we are sons and daughters. But as children of God, we are expected to live for Him and not for ourselves. So, this living after the flesh, as St. Paul says, is when we are selfish and follow what we want or the world wants, and not what God wants. I am reading a book

that makes the argument that the opposite of love is not hate but selfishness. We know that God is love, and here St. Paul seems to be making the argument that God would hate selfishness. Of course, we could have guessed that in the abstract, but we might have a little trouble defining selfishness, or perhaps, agreeing when it applies to us as opposed to our neighbors. There is a lot of grey area in a vague term such as this one.

Now couple this potential for confusion over what exactly living for God might look like with a false prophet blowing into town. Of course, he will not come with the “Hi, my name is False Prophet” name tag that would make our lives easier. Nor will he have horns and a pitchfork. He will not be literally dressed like Lambchop, but he will be dressed like, and more important, *sound* like a good soul. His teachings will *appear* orthodox in many ways, or at least appeal to our common sense. Maybe they will appeal to the larger audience of the unchurched world. Likely there will be wonderful works to which he will point, so that we

think that he is genuine. But unless he is preaching conversion of the soul, he does not represent God's truth. A Christian preacher who does not believe that he himself is called to conversion is a hypocrite, which brings us back to selfishness: what is more selfish than expecting others to repent of their sinful ways but not being willing to do the same yourself?

But wait, it gets worse! We will know them by their fruits. Not blueberries and bananas sadly, but by the fruits of the spirit: good works and steadfast character. Now, it would be so easy to go into a rant about our political system here. (Talk about low-hanging fruit!) I do not watch much news, but I had the tv on the other night. The talking head was saying how everything Biden says is a lie. So I switched to another station: that talking head was saying how everything Trump says is a lie. I am not making this up: they could have had the same script writer!

But Paul and Our Lord were talking to Christians, or at least people trying to emulate them. Would we as Christians fare any

better? I saw a horrible headline in a magazine this week (and not one of the tabloids by the check-out stand either): “Pastor charged after hitting wife on flight; told police he was upset that she was upgraded to 1<sup>st</sup> class without him.” I read the entire article: yes, it is just as bad as it sounds. They have only been married 18 months and had already started marital counseling before this incident. He has now been banned from flying that airline and the wife has filed for a restraining order. As if the story isn’t heart-breaking enough, think of all the non-believers who are going to read that headline or article and think to themselves, “Boy, I am glad I never bought into that Christianity farce. I certainly do not want to be involved in an organization where one of the leaders treats his wife like that!”

But we need not pick on some unknown preacher in an unknown town. What about us in the Continuing Church? When formed in the 1970s, the founders believed we would eclipse the Episcopal Church in size within a few years. Has that happened?

Not hardly – and the Episcopal Church has been trying to help us by hemorrhaging members for most of that time! But let us make it more local: this Parish left the Episcopal Church in the early 1990s. Then the Parish left the Anglican Church in America in the late 2000-oughts. Then the Parish nearly left the Anglican Province of Christ the King two and a half years ago. We have been so busy fighting, we have not had time to plant any seeds much less harvest the fruit!

Now I have no doubt that some of you think I must be exaggerating, or that surely Satan would not bother himself with the details of one Parish in a city that runs as if the Almighty has forgotten about it. So I would like to close with a few words by one of the greats, Paul Harvey. He delivered this in 1965, but it reads like it could have been written yesterday. I have taken the liberty of giving you just some highlights:

“If I were the devil ... If I were the Prince of Darkness, I'd want to engulf the whole world in darkness...

To the young, I would whisper that ‘The Bible is a myth.’ I would convince them that man created God instead of the other way around. I would confide that what’s bad is good, and what’s good is ‘square.’...

If I were the devil I’d soon have families at war with themselves, *churches at war with themselves*, and nations at war with themselves; until each in its turn was consumed...

— soon I could evict God from the courthouse, then from the schoolhouse, and then from the houses of Congress. And in His own churches I would substitute psychology for religion, and deify science. I would lure priests and pastors into misusing boys and girls, and church money. If I were the devil I’d make the symbols of Easter an egg and the symbol of Christmas a bottle.

In other words, if I were the devil I’d just keep right on doing what he’s doing.”

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