

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 21, October 5, 2008, World Wide Communion Sunday, and dedicated to the glory of God!

“Fruit Production”

Matthew 21, 33-46

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The first Sunday each October is known as World Communion Sunday. Across the globe and the lines that separate us, our prayer on this day is that Christians – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal – may ALL be one in Christ at the table of the Lord.

Following World War II and the advance of the nuclear age, this Sunday was set aside in the belief and hope that we would find unity in our diversity; that all tongues, races, and creeds of believers would find a way to come to the table – laying down their arsenal of judgments against one another and embracing our savior who meets us here – no matter how we know him or speak his name. The idea was (and is) magnificent. The hope it embodies is irrepressible. However, its practice in our times has waned considerably.

We are in the ninth year of the 21st century and Christianity has witnessed the decline of mainline Protestant denominations and continuing unrest in the Roman Catholic Church. Coupled with the global emergence of Pentecostals and independent Evangelicals, the face of Christianity appears to be less united, while more diverse, than in any period since Jesus broke bread at the Last Supper with his disciples. I often think our lack of unity must break Jesus' heart.

Today, as we prepare First Church's celebration of World Wide Communion, we pause to hear the word of God and – as Jesus puts it – to "listen to another parable."

We call this the **Parable of the Wicked Tenants**. As with all the parables, it begins "There was man who . . . (in this case) planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it and built a watchtower."

This parable is about "fruit production." Seemingly more allegorical than parabolic, this story twists, turns, and finally ends with a judgment on people who produce bad fruit and blessing on people who produce good fruit, i.e. the fruit of the kingdom of God! In the end, our storyteller celebrates the joy of good fruit.

Every one of us want to be identified as a "good fruit" Christian. And we all want to be identified with the "good fruit" people! We all want to believe – at some level – we are in the community of the blessed, that we have our membership in the right church. But, this parable doesn't say that membership in the "right" community will automatically place us among the joy-filled people

producing "the fruit of the kingdom of God!"

Delivered from the heart of an early Christian community squabbling among themselves and in a "tug-of-spiritual war" with the synagogues down the street (and across the Mediterranean Sea), this parable makes no guarantees that Christians are granted special entrance into the kingdom of God. In fact, it makes no promises of the coming kingdom of God to Christians at all. This is not a story about good Christians and disobedient Jews.

Rather, the "owner of the vineyard," (Read: "our God") is expecting "good fruit" simply growing out of righteous living, human caring and courageous witnessing.

In our fruit production, what does "good fruit" look like? This harvest time of year is a great time to look at "good fruit" and "bad fruit."

The other day, Susan, Daniel, Sarah, Thalia and I were out apple and pear picking. The good fruit was solid, ripe, tasty, nutritious and wonderful to taste and see. It was usually hanging on limbs that were weighed down by hundreds of pounds of good fruit. The bad fruit, on the other hand, was soft, full of worms, full of holes, bitter, overly ripe, easy to toss, and hard to look at. Bad fruit has fallen because it wasn't picked or was picked at by birds or other animals. Bad fruit is often rotting, stinking and attracting sweat bees and other inserts and creatures that feed off of garbage.

In spiritual terms, "bad fruit" in our lives is the stuff of our lives that is unattended, unattractive, rotten, smelly,

uncared for and unappealing. We may refer to this as sin or simple neglect. The Apostle Paul refers to this as the attractions and actions of “the flesh,” which serves as a large umbrella over life. It is the stuff of our lives we don’t want to share with others and certainly don’t want broadcast to any listening audience anywhere. I find “bad fruit” is often a product of poor care of ourselves, our spiritual life or our families and work. Remember, in fruit production, we have to take ownership for the fruit we produce. We might be able to blame the weather conditions, or circumstances around us, but responsibility for fruit production comes back to us.

“Good fruit” is the stuff of our lives which is well-attended, attractive to ourselves and others and it is healthy. Good fruit is borne in honesty and love. Good fruit is borne of “the Spirit of God,” again according to the Apostle Paul. The fruits of the spirit are 28 in all, according to Paul. They include joy, charity, truth, kindness, hope and love. We see the fruits of the spirit in others and in ourselves when we approach the tree of life and faith with open eyes.

Like with any fruit-bearing tree, there is no one who has only good fruit hanging from their limbs. We are, after all, people (and as Wayne Piper is apt to say, quoting one of his dear friends, “People, they are everywhere”).

To prepare for a harvest of good fruit in our lives, we need to take a few steps each day and each week. They are so simple, we may miss them.

We need to plant the seeds of the spiritual life. I see

worship as the seed of the spiritual life. Coming to worship is not a passing item. It is essential to a life of good fruit production. Being with others and giving time and tithes to God is essential to spiritual life.

Second, once planted, we need to water and nurture the seeds of God's love. Again, quite simply, this is where prayer and meditation come in. As the gospel hymn says, "Take time to be holy." Prayer is turning over to God throughout each day the things of lives. Each day, we need to talk to God and listen to God. Good fruit comes out of good communication.

Third, take time to read scripture and study God's word in a way that nurtures the seeds planted in worship, prayer and praise. For this, there are many ways to enter God's Word. Start in Genesis and go through to Revelation. Read the Psalms and John's Gospel, as I recommended a few weeks ago. Read other books of theology and spirituality. Be open to hearing God's word and the word of God's people in your daily life.

Fourth, take time to serve others. Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty. Some of you may say, "I do all of this, each and every week." If so, my guess is that you are producing good fruit. If not, I recommend the Jesus way of repentance. Perhaps, in your pride, you are not able to admit your mistakes and confess your sins. In the depth of your brokenness, you might not be able to face your shortcomings and actions that leave you breathless and empty. Look at your life and admit where you are planting bad seeds and caring for them – and neglecting the good ones. When you face this, I am

sure your bad fruit production will drop, and in time, if nurtured and cared for, the good fruit production will hit 95% or more!

In sharing such simple metaphors and clear instructions for the spiritual life with such brilliant and gifted people of faith, I can't help but think these simple words might hit some of you like the words of Chance Gardener in the 1979 film *Being There*, starring Peter Sellers.

Being There is a one-joke movie based upon a fragile premise. Still, the understated delivery of the film, along with a restrained performance by the talented (and usually rambunctious) Peter Sellers, underlies the fact that *Being There* is a quiet but important fable about society.

The story line centers on a slow-witted gardener named Chance (Peter Sellers), who knows only gardening and what he sees on television, and what transpires when he is suddenly put out into the world. Because Chance speaks so simply and so directly, his words are mistaken for profundities; everything he says is mistaken for a metaphor by the media-mad society. By film's end, Chance – who has become an adviser, of sorts, to one of the world's most wealthy men – is spoken of in glowing terms by men seeking a candidate for the presidency.

Along the way, the rich and powerful of Washington, D.C., mistake his name to be Chance Gardiner and declare his wisdom is beyond measure. When the president of the United States meets Chance, he is surprised by Chance's quiet, unassuming manner (the gardener is not in awe of

the world leader and he does not have the capability to be excited). The president is further caught off-guard by Chance's remarks about current conditions. "As long as the roots are not severed, all will be well in the garden . . . there will be growth in the spring." Mistaking his words for a metaphor about the current political climate, the president remarks, "Well, that's one of the most refreshing opinions I've heard in a long time."

In time, Chance disappears from the national scene but not before he walks on water. Like every other starburst, his 15 minutes of fame passes. But, this gardener's wisdom lives on. He says, "Care for seeds . . . care for the plants . . . care for the roots . . . harvest the fruit . . . and all will be well in the garden." He is right.

With our current economy struggling, with wars raging and rumors of war simmering in the guise and reality of inter-religious struggles, living simply in this garden of life as those called to produce good fruit may seem to you to be trivial. I assure you, it may be the most important work each of us does.

So, as we seek to produce good fruit in the week ahead, let us begin this effort, by turning to God's table of grace. On this World Wide Communion Sunday, let's invite ALL our brothers and sisters in faith to join us!

"Come! Join us at our Lord's table! Come to his table of sacrifice, victory, grace, forgiveness and resurrection hope!"

Here you will find the fruit of the vine and wheat from the earth. Here the table is set with good food for God's

holy and beloved people seeking to produce good fruit.
Amen.

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