

BEAR MUCH FRUIT

Several years ago, I was asked by a colleague of mine to trade pulpits with them on a Sunday. She was pastoring a small church and she wanted me to lead them through a process of discernment. After worship, we gathered for the discernment meeting. It wasn't a meeting of the congregation in the strictest sense. It was really more of an open forum.

During the meeting one of the members got up and spoke to the assembled body. He had an idea. He felt that a delegation from the church should go to the local community leaders and ask them to send some people to them. If they could just get the community to rally around this little church, all would be well.

I didn't say anything when I heard that, but I will say this to you. At the very least I must give this guy an "A" for his originality. I have never heard that suggestion before. Frankly, I'm dubious that it would work, but it is a creative suggestion.

I have now been a pastor for more than 25 years. In fact, it's been almost thirty years. There have been many wonderful things that have happened in those years. There has also been much heartache. I was called to enter the ministry during a time when the church is in rapid decline nationwide. It's been heartbreaking to watch. Things that I've tried to stop or even slow that decline have met with limited success- at best. Many days I find myself longing for retirement that is still several years away, because of the stress and anxiety of being unable to stop the slow but inexorable slide.

The thing that should be noted is that this problem is not unique to this church, or even this denomination. The Presbyterian Church has declined faster than other denominations, but they're all in decline. When it comes to religious belief, the fastest growing segment of our population is the group that contains atheists, agnostics, and those who respond, "nothing in particular." Our culture has labeled this group the "nones", because when they are asked their religious affiliation on the census form, that's the box they check.

The only other group that is experiencing any growth is the group we might call other faiths. These don't fit neatly into the evangelical camp, or the Roman Catholic camp, or the mainline protestant camp. Some of them aren't even Christian. This includes such diverse beliefs as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, but it also includes the Mormons and Eastern Orthodox Christians. It is small in comparison to other groups, but it is experiencing some growth.

Like others, many of whom are more qualified to answer the question than I am, I have pondered the causes of that decline. I don't have a ready answer, but I do have some conclusions about the causes of it.

One theory that has been advanced to explain the decline has been that the rapid technological development of our society has led to secularization. Recently while I was up in Louisville, I was shown some statistical data that seems to corroborate this idea, although there was something strange about what the data showed. It would be reasonable to expect that the people most prone to secularization, would be those who were better educated. It would be logical to assume that better educated people would be more likely to embrace advanced technology, and therefore, be more susceptible to secularization. The data seems to show that there is a weak correlation between education and secularization, but what's strange is that it's the opposite of what you would expect; a person is more likely to be active in their faith if they are better educated; it is the less well educated who are drifting away from faith.

Another reason for the decline is a growing distrust within our society for institutions of all sorts. Governmental institutions, business institutions, social institutions (such as the Boy Scouts and Rotary Clubs), and institutions of higher learning have all become the object of ridicule and disdain. Participation in all of these institutions has declined and the respect that they once held in our society has been mostly lost. Religious institutions are no exception.

The disturbing thing about these societal trends is that there is very little that we can do to overcome them. They are what they are. Those of us who are people of faith are trying to swim against the tide. We can't change the perception of a whole society; in some ways we have no choice but to accept things as they are.

It seems to me, however, that there is at least one aspect of this decline that rarely receives attention. There is a theological question raised by this text which might have something to do with the problem.

In this text Jesus says that he is the vine, and we are the branches. He goes on to say that we should bear much fruit for the gospel. Any branch that does not bear fruit is cut off and cast into the fire. Often times I hear this passage interpreted as relating to individuals, but Jesus was speaking to a group. I want us to think about this metaphor of bearing fruit. In what ways are we bearing fruit for the gospel?

Those of you who have known me all these years, know that I'm forgetful by nature. You may not be aware that a side effect of that is that I have a propensity to lose things. I'm always laying down my keys or my sunglasses and forgetting them. Rarely does two weeks

go by that I don't have to call my cell phone to see where it is. I'm so bad about losing umbrellas, that Barbara bought a bunch of them a year or two ago and she hid half of them so that she would always know where to find one.

I think all of us are prone to something like this. We focus on things that are important to us- things that matter to us. That causes us to set aside other things. You know I don't mean to sound critical of the effort of countless church members and ministers I've known through the years. Many of them are working hard. They've put a lot of time and effort into the church, but here's the question I want us to ponder. Did Jesus ask us to make a church, or did he ask us to make disciples?

Jesus told Peter, "Upon this rock I build my church." To me the implication is simple; we are supposed to make disciples; we are supposed to spread the good news; we are supposed to love one another. Jesus will build the church on that foundation.

When Moses led the people out of Egypt towards the promised land, the Lord had a plan. It was relatively simple. I shall be your God. You shall be my people. After having been slaves in Egypt for four hundred years, the notion of having their own land was a compelling one. Yet throughout the journey to the Promised Land the people of Israel complained about what they didn't have. They complained about the sacrifices that they were asked to make.

When they got to the Promised Land, did things get better? No! They allowed the worship of other Gods. They continued to act in unjust ways, sinning against their neighbors. They took the gifts that God bestowed on them and squandered them. The Old Testament makes it clear that the fortunes of the nation were tied to their disobedience. They may have been God's chosen people; they certainly didn't act like it. They ate of the fruit that God gave them, but they produced no fruit of their own.

We have been blessed. Economic, technological, and social resources that our ancestors would have killed to have are ours for the taking. Even better, we have the promise of the forgiveness of all of our sins, eternal life, and the eternal, unconditional love of a risen savior. What have we done with it? Did we really come to serve God, or are we just here so that God can serve us?

So, is it really that simple? Do we just need to be more faithful, and everything will get better? Maybe and maybe not. Jesus says every branch that bears fruit I prune. The way I read that is that we can expect some setbacks along the way. At times we may struggle. It isn't going to be easy. However, a funny thing happens when a gardener prunes a plant. If the plant isn't pruned the individual fruits don't get very big. In some cases, if you don't

prune a plant, the fruit isn't fit to consume. On the other hand, when you prune it, the individual fruits become larger and more succulent.

We're not going to be able to change all of American Society. It just isn't possible. Maybe we were never meant to do so. Maybe our task is to remain faithful to the Lord. Maybe instead we should focus on making ourselves better Christians. Maybe we should just focus on being the people of Jesus Christ. Let Christ worry about changing society. Let Christ worry about filling our pews. I think we should focus on bearing much fruit.