

house, a nice car, a nice job, a nice family, a nice retirement, collecting shells as the last chapter before you stand before the Creator of the universe to give an account of what you did: “Here it is Lord — my shell collection!

Jesus says, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

Virtually everyone in our culture values doing good. Who doesn’t want the world to be a better place? People will donate a dollar or two to the Walmart children’s charity on the way out of the store, people will buy socks, shoes and canned good for people in need. People post on social media how committed they are to ending various injustices. And that’s good. But it’s not good in the way of Jesus. What Jesus is talking about should set us apart in the do-good industries of our time.

In our church, doing good looks like raising amazing amounts of money to fund our in-house programs for kids and also sending kids to camp. But we don’t stop there — we actually run these programs week in and week out, investing in the lives of kids and their families. It looks like blessing bags for anyone who needs them at Christmastime — but it doesn’t end there — it looks like ongoing relationships and assistance for those who live precariously. It looks like a church that goes out of its way to share the good news of resurrection and a God who loves with all, countering the power of a nihilistic culture with no hope. And it all happens because first and foremost we are a people rooted, not in our desire to make the world a better

place, but rooted in our love for Jesus. There’s a word for getting your beliefs right. It’s “orthodoxy.” It’s a word similar to “orthodontist.” What does an orthodontist do? They set your bite right. But most of us don’t go to the orthodontist because we’re worried about our bite. We go to have beautiful teeth. A better bite is good — but beauty is what we all want.

When we abide in the vine — when we learn from Jesus and our beliefs about the nature of the world and the nature of ourselves our bite is set right. Our good deeds get really good. But most of all our lives become beautiful — attractional — irresistible.

That’s why Jesus wants us to be famous for our fruit. Not because we’ll make the world a better place but because He will. But our fruit — rooted in orthodoxy — right belief — is beautiful — attractional — irresistible.

People outside our church should see us and say, “I don’t understand what they believe — and they say and sing some pretty weird stuff — but I wouldn’t want to live in a world without them. They’re amazing. They do the most good of anyone I know and I’m so thankful they’re in my community.

Jesus wants us to be known for our fruit. Because our fruit is a sign that he is at work in us, making us a whole other sort of people. And that’s the idea that will win over our world and cause many more people to glorify God in heaven. Thanks be to God, Amen.

“Known For It: Fruit”

May 19th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: John 15:5-8

By Rev. Mike Putnam

One of the things I admire about the Baby Boom Generation is their sincere desire to “Make the world a better place.”

That generation (that many of you belong to) is so darn optimistic. Born between 1946 and 1964, the Baby Boomers were determined to make a difference. They would fight all the good fights, do all the good things, get under the problems that their parent’s generation left behind.

It was a generation that enthusiastically sang, “All You Need Is Love” and they sought to love in ways that no one had ever thought of before. It was a generation that brought about the sexual revolution, they tackled gender inequality, racism and social stratification. They questioned established thinking, walked away from institutions that their parents built and rethought what it means to live a good life.

It was one of the first generations that truly believed you could be anything you wanted to be and “make it” in a way never dreamed before. Baby Boomers were a generation inclined to action.

But it was also a generation that disengaged from the church in droves. And that, in large part, had to do with the fact that they de-emphasized theology and belief and instead emphasized good works and action. Because, “You don’t need to go to church to be a good person,” they argued.

One Baby Boomer United Church minister epitomized this thinking when she received international attention for saying she doesn’t believe in God. Instead, she said “How you live is more important than what you believe.”

But is that true? Can you do things without believing things? What informs your doing? What causes you to act? What causes

you to say, “Things aren’t the way they’re supposed to be and I’m going to do something about it?” Isn’t it our beliefs that inspire our actions?

And I say that because for 2000 years, people who believed certain things — people who believed that the Holy Spirit conceived in the virgin Mary’s womb the Son of God, people who believed that God’s son walked the earth and he taught, healed, and blessed many to show that the Kingdom of God was at hand. People who believed that Jesus was eventually put to death, buried in a tomb, and on the third day was raised back to life, people who believed that Jesus was going to come back soon, people who believed that this world isn’t it, and who believed that the power of sin, sorrow and death had been defeated by Jesus, were the same people who outlawed slavery, who invented the hospital, and the orphanage, who fought against infanticide, who took a stand against war and violence, and who transformed the world’s ethics.

Because people who believe certain things also do certain things. But we need to be careful this morning, because we might misunderstand all of this, and assume that Jesus sounds kind of a like a Baby Boomer. Because this morning Jesus says, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you must bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

But take this statement out of context I worry those of you who are Baby Boomers might assume this is just Jesus affirming what you already believe. We’re just supposed to make the world a better place. We’re supposed to do things — we’re supposed to be nicer people and everything will get better and better.

I was talking to a colleague recently who had a congregation member critique their

preaching saying, “I notice you talk a lot about Jesus. But maybe you could give us a little more to sink our teeth into – talk about the issues of our day give us some homework.” I said, “Let me guess, he was a baby boomer.”

Because the problem is, what happens when we take the focus off of Jesus? Can you grow fruit apart from the vine? If making a difference is our goal – what does that look like? Are all versions of doing good actually good? Where do we start? What should our emphasis be and how should the church go about its work?

Remember, the Residential Schools were once the latest in modern liberal social justice work of the church. Running errands for the government of the day – the church got caught up in the work of colonization and cultural genocide of indigenous peoples, which had absolutely nothing to do with Jesus. But it was done by people who were absolutely convinced that they were doing good. So, we must learn our lesson and be very careful how we attempt to be fruitful.

In the United Church our denomination is often quick to take a stand on issues, to endorse new philosophies, and to protest against ideologies. But what if sometimes we’re not called to action, but we’re called to something a little less exciting. We’re called first to abide.

Because Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.” In other words, our good efforts don’t flow from our own desire to make the world a better place, but from our abiding in Jesus.

In Jesus’ time life revolved around the rhythms and seasons of the vineyard, and Jesus used the vineyard as a metaphor so that everyone could understand the way that we are to do good.

And his point is that the good in our efforts isn’t an end in themselves. Jesus wants us to start our world-improvement-efforts by making our home in his presence so that he

can make his home in us. Jesus wants his good to flow through us.

How do we do that? Do you have to become like a monk or a nun? Do you have to spend many hours a day reading scripture, praying and living an ascetic lifestyle? Well, maybe. But actually, I’m not sure that Jesus is asking you to do something you’re not already doing. All of us are already abiding. The question isn’t are you abiding? The question is what are you abiding in?

Because all of us make an emotional home in something. It’s where your mind goes when you have time to think. It’s where your feelings go when you’re worn out. It’s where your bodies go when you have free time. It’s where your money goes after you’ve paid your bills. We all make our emotional and spiritual home somewhere. The question is where?

If it’s in the never-ending scroll of social media – we will make our home there. And the fruit will be our anger, outrage and we might become yet another distracted keyboard warrior. Does that lead to fruit that will last?

If we spend our time attending to the endless que of streaming platforms like Netflix, Prime and Crave – we will always be seeking the next thing to entertain us and to keep our minds distracted. What kind of fruit will that lead to?

If it’s in the next great party, the next drink, the next exciting adventure we will always be seeking the next thing that can keep us from facing our real challenges or our real issues. Life will be an endless stream of distractions.

But if you find your rest, if you find your contentment, if you find your mind, body and soul drawn to Jesus then you will start to see your life take a whole other shape.

Next Jesus says, “Apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch this is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up and thrown in to the fire and burned.”

Which sounds kind of harsh. I mean, I know all kinds of people who don’t go to church who do all kinds of good things! Are we saying you can’t do good, make a real difference unless you go to church? No, of course not. The question is do those well-intentioned things we do have eternal consequences?

Because as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But King didn’t mean that things would just naturally get better and better with time and all we have to do is good. Goodness is not an inevitability. No, goodness is God’s work. God is working all things for good. The question is, are we working with God?

There are all kinds of people trying to “Make the world a better place.” The question is, why does the world never seem to change very much. Why, for all our efforts, do we never seem to become nicer, kinder, gentler as a society? Why, for all our cumulative individual efforts, does our world seem so rife with hate, outrage, anger and dissatisfaction?

Am I saying things aren’t getting better? No, things do get better here and there. We don’t beat our kids anymore when they do wrong – the society has changed their minds about that – but are kids all kinder, more respectful and more well-mannered because of it? Did that micro change lead to a macro revolution? No.

Am I saying we should go back to beating our kids when they’re bad? No, but I am saying that the problems we face can’t be solved by small adjustments to thinking on this and that. The problem is far bigger and way more complex. Christians have always known that the problem is the curse of sin and we’re all infected with it and we can’t solve it by trying to be or do good.

The prophet Isaiah once warned us, “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags...” (Isaiah 64:6). Will our efforts to make the world a better place stand the test of time?

Well, in a way, yes. But it’s also possible that our well-intentioned efforts are the very things the next generations will be trying to correct or will be apologizing for.

And to that, Jesus says, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

How will people know that we are followers of Jesus? By our high moralistic stands? Because we dress differently? Because we look down our noses at certain people? No, by our fruit.

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? Jesus is turning religion on its head. He’s saying your faith is no longer only about the vertical (us getting right with God) because Jesus has dealt with that problem for us. Now, religion is also about the horizontal (showing that you are part of God’s family by loving others).

Now, we should be famous for the way that Jesus shows himself in the fruit of your life. Christians – people who actively follow Jesus – people who abide in his words and allow the Holy Spirit to guide their lives will be a whole other kind of person accomplishing a whole other kind of mission, and as a result achieving a whole lot of good.

There’s a story that American pastor John Piper told years ago to a huge gathering of teenagers. Quoting from Reader’s Digest he says, “Bob and Penny took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their thirty-foot trawler, playing softball and collecting shells.”

“That’s a tragedy,” Piper said. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. And I get forty minutes today plead with you,” Piper said to the young people, “don’t buy it.” “With all my heart I plead with you: don’t buy that dream. The American Dream: a nice