

Fruits of the spirit
10 January 2010

“It’s Not about You . . . Because It Is about You”

For this message about bearing the fruits of the Spirit I have brought in this tree. Since it’s winter, there are no leaves or fruit on this tree at the moment, so you might not know what kind of tree it is. But if you’ve ever spent some time in a fruit growing region, you might recognize from its rather odd shape that this is indeed an apple tree. They’re really not much to look at. The apple blossoms are pretty when they appear. But they don’t grow very tall, and it always looks to me like somebody came along with a chainsaw and flattened them off so that they look like a three dimensional “T.” When they’re bare like this one, with their craggy branches, they’re kind of ugly.

Oh, but the fruit you get from them, when it’s ripe, is sweet and crisp and juicy, and oh so good. From where does this fruit come? The orchardist doesn’t put the fruit on the tree. The orchardist prunes the tree into this ugly shape, but the fruit doesn’t come from outside the tree. It comes from its nature, its DNA. It comes from within the tree. This tree has been genetically bred to produce crisp, sweet fuji’s, and that’s what it’s going to do.

Yes, it takes pruning, fertilizing, and care. The orchardist does that to get the best and most fruit that can be gotten. But even if nobody paid any attention to it, it would still produce some fruit. That’s its nature. (*Put tree away.*)

And that’s the first thing I want to say about the fruits of the Spirit. They come from our nature, our DNA, the DNA bred into us at our baptism. Which seems like such an insignificant thing. A few drops of water, a sometimes crying baby, proud parents, a cute, feel good moment. On its surface, it doesn’t seem like much. It certainly doesn’t look spiritual. So how can water do such things? How can water put such DNA in us that we bear sweet fruit?

Martin Luther asked just this question in his *Small Catechism*. “How can water do such great things?” And his answer? “It is not water only that does these things, but God’s Word with the water and our trust in this Word. With the Word of God it is a life-giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit.”

And that’s the second thing I want to say about the fruits of the Spirit. They are both natural and unnatural. Here’s what I mean: that tree I brought in is going to grow fuji apples. That’s its nature. But how many apples and of what size and sweetness, and for how long depend on the health of the tree. If the tree is cared for, gets pruned, gets the right amounts of water and nutrients, etc. it’s going to produce a lot of fruit. If it gets none of those things, it will probably only produce a little. What it produces is both natural and unnatural, that is, cultivated.

Just so with the fruits of the Spirit. Those who are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection are delivered from death and devil and given everlasting salvation. It is now in our nature to be little Christs for the world, to bear the Holy Spirit so that our old sinful self is drowned each day through repentance and that each day a new self is born as the Spirit of God works within us. That new self produces sweet fruit. According to the Bible those fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As baptized children of God, it is now in our nature to produce such fruit.

But how much fruit and of what quality depend on our spiritual health. If we are grounded and growing in the Word of God and even more importantly, if the love of God is flowing through us, then we’re receiving the nutrients we need, and we’re going to produce some pretty impressive fruit. If not, then our production could be pretty meager. What we produce is both natural and unnatural, that is cultivated.

And here’s the third thing I want to say about the fruits of the Spirit. The best way to cultivate them in ourselves is to do our best

to grow them in others. It's not about us. I think it's pretty widely recognized that in terms of human relationships, the less inwardly focused you are, the better off you are. If all you're worried about is yourself, your relationships aren't going to be all that satisfying. But if you act in a caring, loving way toward others, some of those others are going to respond to you in a very satisfying way. From a human relationship point of view, the more you focus on satisfying your needs, the less your needs are going to be met. The same is true of Christian congregations. Those that just worry about themselves are no fun to be in and don't attract newcomers. Those that are outwardly focused, do.

Just so with the fruits of the Sp. You want to cultivate love, joy, peace, and the rest in yourself? Then do you best to grow them in others. Take your epiphany star and put it on a mirror, your computer monitor, your calendar, in your PDA or smart phone, somewhere where it's going to keep getting your attention. And when it gets your attention, ask yourself, "Who is it I should be/could be trying to grow this fruit in? Who around me needs more love? Who needs more joy? Who needs more peace or patience or generosity? How can I cultivate that fruit in them at least a little bit? Do that, and you will find that fruit coming back to you in a most satisfying way.

What does the apple tree do with its apples? It gives them away. If nobody comes along and picks them, they'll fall of their own accord. Fruits are natural things; they come from within, because of the fruit tree's DNA. They are natural things that are cultivated and then given away. The DNA of God's Holy Spirit has been bred into us so that we might bear fruit that is given away.

The great irony of living God's way is that it's not about us, because it *is* about us. In giving ourselves away we find our true selves. The more we work in others, the more we find that God works in us. The more we take care of others, the more we find that God takes care of us. The more we cultivate these sweet fruits in others, the more we find that God grows these sweet fruits in us.