

## **"The Gift of the Tree: Production"**

Galatians 5:16-21; Galatians 5:22-26

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 6, 2015 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

In each of our Advent services this year the lectionary readings make some reference to trees, and this is the thread that runs through all the sermons. Some of the themes will take us in familiar directions, but others may take us into unexpected places. All of these meditations lift up the expectation and fulfillment we find in this holy season, so come along and see where they take us.

Perhaps the most available food to early humanity was fruit. When you walk through an orchard in the warm months of the year, you can't help but be struck by the great abundance hanging from the branches. And multiply that by hundreds of trees, or even thousands, and their production is truly overwhelming. The bounty of the land is awesome.

So it's understandable that our ancient ancestors eagerly sought areas where fruit-bearing trees were plentiful. Even when cultivation began, and men and women were less dependent on naturally-occurring plants, fruit was still highly prized. There are few things more enjoyable in life than a fresh peach, plum, or apple right off the tree. The delight of first bite has been known for generation upon generation.

In Stone Age cave drawings you can find the pomegranate rendered unmistakably. In the Old Testament the fig, the date, the olive, and grape are all mentioned prominently. Fruit has always had a special prominence in Israel because food has usually been scarce, and produce constituted an essential part of the diet. In fact fruit trees were so important that we find ancient Israel was forbidden to destroy them even in time of war.

Perhaps because of the central place that fruit occupied in everyday life, it was also used symbolically in the scriptures. In the creation story the divine command is to be fruitful and multiply. It was also the "first fruits" of the harvest that were dedicated and offered to God in thanksgiving.

A person's actions were also known as fruits, and so we find such phrases as "according to the fruit of his deeds." The analogy of Jesus as being the true vine implies that the authentic vine is that which bears the good fruit. Another example is found in today's text.

In his letter to the church at Galatia, the apostle Paul addresses several local concerns. The first had to do with the question of whether Gentiles had to become Jews first before they could be followers of Christ. This concern was raised by some itinerant teachers who declared that, in addition to having faith in Jesus Christ, a follower was also obligated to keep the Mosaic law. Paul denies here that ritual observances are mandatory. He affirms that one can become a Christian through either pathway.

The other question seemed to come as a result of another controversy. Some teachers asserted that, if we are made right with God through faith, then our actions are not really

important. Again Paul set out to correct this teaching by declaring that faith and deeds can't be separated.

Paul writes: "What I say is this: let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not be drawn to satisfy the lesser desires of human nature. For what our baser part wants is opposed to what the Spirit wants, and what the Spirit wants is opposed to what our human nature wants. For these two are opposed to each other..."

Paul characterizes the works of the flesh as negative actions and then lifts up evils like jealousy and quarreling. He held that engaging in such behaviors is not really living in the manner of Christ.

So Paul draws up another list, and this time he indicates some of the positive traits of actions associated with persons of faith. They include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control. These things are evidence of the Spirit at work in a person. Paul calls these "fruits of the Spirit" because they are the end product of faith. They are the best that can be offered.

Living up to the high standard to which Christ calls us is not easy. First it requires us to know right from wrong; then we have to commit ourselves to that better way; finally, we have to do it. Living up to this high standard is usually not easy, and it may even prove to be costly.

It was for Edith Cavell. She was brought up in the church, went to school, and became a nurse in 1895. Eleven years later she was invited to Belgium to set up a medical training program. After that nation was overrun by the German army in WW I, the hospital where she had worked became a Red Cross hospital. In this setting they cared for both Allied and German wounded.

By August, 1914, the British army was in retreat. In order to escape many of the soldiers hid their uniforms and wore civilian clothing. Of course, if captured, they might be considered spies and would fare even worse; still, the risk seemed worth it to many. With the aid of sympathetic Belgians many of the British soldiers were transported into neutral Holland and to safety.

Edith Cavell was approached by the underground. They pleaded with her to hide some of the escaping soldiers in the hospital. She was well-acquainted with the young and pained faces of her countrymen who had been drawn into this dreadful war. She knew, also, of the frightful conditions in German prisoner-of-war camps. This dedicated nurse believed that God had led her to this work of binding the wounds of any who came in need, and so she didn't hesitate in giving her answer: she would hide the retreating British and save as many as possible.

Edith Cavell did what she felt was right. It was the humanitarian thing to do. More importantly, it was what her faith told her heart. Many an English soldier owed his life to this nurse and probably never even realized it. Her secret work gave her little thanks, but she had the satisfaction of knowing that she helped where it was most needed. As Christ was moved with compassion to aid those who came to him, she too was filled with pity for those being hunted down.

After a while the Germans discovered the plot. The Red Cross nurse was arrested and taken hurriedly through a mock trial. She was set up to be an example for all who would defy the orders of the occupiers. No mercy would be shown. On October 12, 1917, good, kind, gentle, loving Edith Cavell was executed by a military firing squad. She went to her death, however, never recanting the decision she had made.

When her story reached England it became a rallying cry and her devotion galvanized the British people to even greater efforts in the struggle for freedom. After the war her body was brought back to England and she was reburied in honor at Westminster Abbey. It was an appropriate tribute to one who put her own life on the line in order to save others.

The fruits of the Spirit at work in a person are seen through such things as love and joy and peace; through kindness and generosity and faithfulness; through caring and commitment. Paul held up each of these as examples of the Spirit-directed life; and, in Jesus, we see this most clearly borne out.

So, friends, at Christmas this year and at all times, we are challenged to grow in our faith and dedication. Hopefully we will not be put to the ultimate test, as in the case of courageous Edith, but we must always be ready to bear the fruits of discipleship in both the small and greater matters of life.

We honor the Christ Child by the gifts we bring to him, and there is no greater devotion than a heart overflowing with love and made evident to all.