

Bearing Good Fruit

Sunday, December 12, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Luke 3:8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

- **Introduction:** True repentance involves planning for the mindset involved indicates a change in thinking and in worldview. As such it is an ongoing part of the Christian life. To be a truly repentant person one must move away from past choices but also plan to make better choices in the future. So, I decided to begin this talk with a joke about planning and planners.

- **This is a joke I found on some website.**

A shepherd stands on a mountainside in Europe watching over his large flock of sheep. He sees an expensive sportscar speeding toward him on the road nearby. The car skids to a stop, and a man in a tailored suit holding a laptop gets out of the car and approaches him. He asks, “if I can guess the exact number of sheep in your flock, will you give me one?” The shepherd pauses, then says, “I guess so.” The young man fires up the GPS on his computer, utilizes several algorithms and a satellite uplink and concludes that there are 1,586 sheep on this

mountainside. He picks up one and puts it in the back seat of his car. The shepherd asks, “if I can guess your occupation, will you return the animal to me? The man consents. “You’re a professional planner”, says the shepherd. Nonplussed, the man asks how he knew. The shepherd says, first, you came uninvited; second, you charged me for telling me something I already know; and third, you know nothing about my business. Now can I have my dog back?”

Algorithms and GPS aside, the stern words of John the Baptist, so often observed during Advent, speak as much about planning as it does about sorrow for past wrong, sinful choices. Imagine that it is another hot day in Israel and we are at the banks of the Jordan River where John preaches.

- **set the stage**

Luke tells us that during the tenure of Annas and Ciaphas as high priests the word of God came to John out in the wilderness, and he began to preach repentance in the area of the Jordan River, in fulfillment of a prophecy by Isaiah. He is not gentle with his audience, calling them a "brood of vipers" and demanding that they bear the fruits worthy of repentance. He sometimes used "fruit" in the singular as Mathew's Gospel records it and Matthew also notes that he did not give religious leaders any special courtesies. They were "broods of vipers" as well. He warned them that their

association with Abraham would not save them from judgment and that the "ax is laid to the root of the tree" indicating that God did not consider "fruit" optional. Coming from an agricultural society, the people would have seen what happened to trees that did not produce fruit. The same is expected of people as well.

- **fruits worthy of repentance**

- other examples of "fruit"*

Aside from the literal meaning, "fruit" symbolized answered prayer, children, prayers spoken in praise of Almighty God and the qualities of a person growing spiritually-qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The fruit mentioned in this context is somewhat different in that it does not come about naturally but requires us to be deliberate.

- *examples in the immediate context*

The people who heard this asked a question that should be considered after any and every sermon: "What shall we do then?" Happily, John gives specifics. He tells the people who have two coats to give one to someone who has none. Do the same with food. He told tax collectors to collect only what was appointed. Tax collectors were allowed to set their own fees and most of them extorted large sums well beyond the governmental tax. He told soldiers not to intimidate, nor give false accusations and to be content with

their wages. Note that both groups had the common temptation to abuse people due to greed. The Apostle Paul would later write that the "love of money is a root of evil." (1 Timothy 6:10)

- **but note the verb for "bear"**

The big difference between these obvious examples of "fruit" and some of the others that develop over time is in the verb here translated "to bear". It does not mean "to bear fruit" which refers to the character traits of someone who is growing spiritually as a follower of Jesus Christ. That is something that happens over time and does not require the immediate and total attention of the person so bearing. We don't grow in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) by thinking about the fruit of the spirit all the time. But here it is different. The word translated "to bear" literally means "to do" or "to make", and it is in a form of the past tense sometimes used for immediacy and emphasis. The verb is also imperative. One could argue that John was saying "don't talk to me about 'being children of Abraham' as if your association with Abraham freed you from right and wrong. Do the fruits of repentance! Do them now! You should have done them yesterday!" He is not allowing them any time to "grow" in this fruit.

application: growing involves how we treat other people as well as how we reverence God

John Calvin wrote “Repentance is an inward matter, which has its seat in the heart and soul, but afterwards yields its fruits in a change of life.”* These fruits are "entry level fruit" that should be expected immediately from someone who is truly repentant. It is basic for a follower of Jesus to share clothing, food, and never take advantage of people just to get more money. It means to make a serious effort to make right any wrongs. One article I read said this, for example: “If someone steals money, it should be repaid to the extent of his ability. If a banker has embezzled a million dollars from the financial institution for which he has worked, he might never be able to repay that entire sum, but he should attempt to do what he can.

We are not permitted to enjoy the fruit of our crimes. Of course, it is always possible that a victim of abuse might ‘forgive’ the debt (Mt. 18:27), but the sinner must never take that for granted. We must never reason, ‘Because I cannot repair **all** my sins, I will make no attempt to remedy **any** of them.’”** Advent is a good time to take a review of our lives, and of the church. Where are we now? How is our soul, both corporate and individual? Do we need to revisit the basics of Christian charity?

- **Conclusion:** John the Baptist, no doubt a fiery preacher, demanded the fruit of repentance of those who came to him. If he were here in the United States today, what would he say? Advent is to good time to

review our fruits, including those most basic fruits of all, the fruits of repentance.

* <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/fruit-repentance>'

** <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1015-what-is-the-fruit-of-repentance>