

BEAR FRUITS

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December 5, 2010 - The Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1-12

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, a 4 Sunday season which marks the new year in the church calendar. "Happy New Year, church!" But wait a second. Advent is no raucous Times Square new year. In the church, the new year is an occasion for simplicity. We begin by stripping the noise away and preparing our hearts for the birth of Jesus. Both the remembrance of the event in Bethlehem and the anticipation of the Spirit of Christ being born anew in each of us. So we set aside the extraneous noise and we become attentive to the stillness of God who is *always* present, hidden behind and within every moment. And we wait.

A couple weeks ago I observed a mini Advent at Holy Cross Monastery. Holy Cross is an Anglican monastery in the Benedictine tradition. It sits on a beautiful spot on the Hudson, an hour upstate. I was there by myself to participate in a Centering Prayer retreat. What do you do on a 3 day retreat at a monastery? I have been asked. I would say you eat, sleep, and pray. But that's not exactly accurate. More precisely, it's pray, eat, sleep, in that order. The eating and the sleeping only serve the function of giving you energy for more praying. So my 3 days were spent with the community's 5 daily worship services: Morning Prayer, Eucharist, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline. And on top of that, there were 2 one-hour-long sessions of silent individual centering prayer per day. I spent much time reflecting, stripping everything away except reflection on what's at the center of life. And in the course of that 3 days of stillness and reflection, I was

reminded what is meant in the Gospel Passage When John the Baptist looks at the Pharisees and Sadducees who have come to be baptized and says, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." In other words, "You hypocrites. Who invited you? This isn't some show. You've got to be real. Bear Fruits that demonstrate your commitment."

Bear fruits! It was the baptismal covenant for these Pharisees, and it's the same for us today. We should stop posturing. And be genuine. Let our yes be yes and our no be no. Let the Holy Spirit take the reins, and we will bear fruit. More than anything else, the Christian ethical life is about bearing the fruits of the Spirit. The confirmation class knows that St. Paul provides a handy list of these fruits in Galatians 5. Ready? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. When we display these fruits, we demonstrate evidence that God is making progress in our lives. But we have to qualify the robust character of these fruits

St. Paul is not just talking about loving loved ones. Or finding peace in a peaceful situation any more than he's talking about being gentle with a baby or faithful to your golden retriever. Jesus basically said 'it's easy to love your friends. But I say to you, love your enemies.' He doesn't say blessed are those who enjoy peace. But 'blessed are those who make peace.'

The fruit of the Spirit is the medicine for the pain in the world. Real love and joy and peace and patience have the capacity to absorb death and overcome it. These fruits are very special. Like any fruit, the spiritual fruits only grow with deliberate care and attention. And in order for a fruit tree to flourish, you have to cut it back from time to time. You have to prune away the unhealthy and extraneous branches if you want to focus the tree's energy and resources on the healthy branches. And optimizing the harvest yield means only a few branches per tree.

According to the *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening*, an apple tree should only have 6-8 mature branches. An old apple farmer once told me that the test of having properly pruned an apple tree is this: "The tree should be so free of clutter in the middle that when you throw a cat through it, it doesn't have anything to cling to on its way through." He wasn't exactly an animal lover, but the illustration is a helpful way to think about the simplicity of a bountiful apple tree. Pruning is necessary for bearing the best fruit... Of course by now you've probably realized that what I'm really talking about here is simplifying our lives. Saying *no* to things.

At this time of year, wouldn't it be great if the gospel was for the church to stage a conspiracy of simplicity and saying no? Well it is. Even Jesus said no to things. There are moments in the gospel narrative when deserving people come to Jesus for healing, but he says no. Why? As Rob Bell says, it's not that he says no to them as persons, it was just that he had already said *yes* to something else. Namely, going to Jerusalem to face his destiny. This is such a key point to grasp. Especially for those of us who have a difficult time saying *no*. It might just be that we have such a hard time saying *no* to things that come up because we haven't really said *yes* to anything else.

When we prune everything else away and focus on our core commitments, what

remains of our lives? For me, I think what remains is the desire to be a caring father, a loving husband. A faithful son. A reliable friend. A compassionate neighbor. An informed citizen. These are my fruit bearing branches. These are the things I say *yes* to. So, aside from the occasional football game, I really *don't* have time for anything else. Especially not a haircut.

Advent is a time for us to prune away all the extra stuff. I believe the spiritual fruit that is yielded from pruning and cultivating simplicity, is the exact medicine our frantic world needs. This was evident to me at the monastery, where one of the brothers gave his interpretation of the Benedictine vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In response to a question about the relevance of the vow in the contemporary world he said, the Benedictine vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience is really the decision to be attentive to a silent God by blocking the noise of money, sex, and power. Tell me that's not relevant! Money, sex, and power can each threaten to distort and destroy our relationships with each other and with God. So the Benedictines play it safe altogether.

Now, clearly this life is not for everyone. But I am convinced that bearing fruit is for everyone. Each of us is expected to bear fruit. Each of us should prune ourselves from time to time. What does that look like? I can't say for sure what it looks like for everyone, but maybe we take the invitation to that Christmas party that is just one too many and we RSVP no. Maybe we *unsubscribe* from a few email lists. Maybe we take it easy on ourselves when it comes to getting the kids dressed for church. They don't need to look like bankers. Maybe we cancel that trip that really isn't necessary and spend the time making a family memory. Maybe pruning means doing our homework on Friday after school so we don't have to skip church on Sunday night. I had to get that one in there somewhere.

Whatever it is we prune, I hope we realize that the ultimate point is making time to pray, so we might come to recognize and consent to the perfect work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Then and only then will we bear the medicinal fruit that heals the world. When, in the course of prayer, we concede to God's work in our lives, something happens: Prayer exposes the truth. Prayer helps us see just how much energy most of us spend building entire lives based on our fears.

Fears of financial instability. Fears of being seen as average. Fear of downward mobility. Fear of being unloved or unlovable. Fear of getting old. Fear of falling behind. Fear of not being in control. When we lend serious credence to our fears, we say *yes* to lives of fear and *no* to the sufficiency of God.

If we want to bear the fruits of the Spirit, we must do one thing: We must prune our fears. And Instead, trust in the slow work of God. We must leave only the branches which represent our relationships and open ourselves to the flow of divine energy in those relationships. Then, in the Spirit of Advent, we can wait and watch as the Spirit of God transforms each of us into God bearers, people who give birth to Christ in the world. Just like Mary. Because that's who we really are.

Amen.