**October 8, 2017**

**18th Sunday After Pentecost**

**Fruitful Relationships**

**First Presbyterian Church**

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**The Rev. Dr. Carrie Mitchell**

George Burns is credited with quipping, “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, then having the two as close together as possible.” So here it is…

Today’s scriptures teach us the relationships we have been gifted by God are meant to bear fruit. Would you like to know how?

Matthew has been writing about ruptured relationships for some time in his gospel account.

The day after Jesus upended the tables of the money changers, he reenters the temple; and this time, the chief priests, the elders, and the Pharisees are all present and they are seething. "By what authority are you doing these things?"they demand. After telling them another vineyard story, Jesus tells them this one--our text for today.

The images are not veiled. Matthew calls it a parable, but it is really an allegory. The things in the story have direct correlations. Most simply, God is the landowner and Israel is the vineyard. The tenant farmers are the religious establishment; they are exactly the group standing in front of Jesus right now, the ones with their arms crossed and their veins popping out. Those in the allegory who come to collect the harvest are the great prophets of Israel's history and finally, Jesus references himself as the one who finally comes to collect some fruit.

The landowner is rightly angry about how his representatives and his son have been treated, but he also continues to care about the harvest. He wants what a vineyard is supposed to produce: fruit; sweet, tangible, productive fruit.

Tim Keller, in his book Center Church, makes the case that fruitfulness is the way ministry should be evaluated. The biblical image, he argues, is not success by membership numbers or faithfulness by public practice of piety. The biblical image is fruitfulness.[[1]](#footnote-1)

How are we supposed to bear this fruit? God is not a landowner with a whip providing negative incentive for us to do precisely as God would prefer. God is the landowner that has signed a lease and formed a relationship with us tenants. God gives us free will. God blesses us with opportunities and then trusts us to be good stewards. Just as the owner of the vineyard had taken all the steps necessary for success, so God has blessed us. The question is what kind of stewards will we be?

The risk with all segments of our lives is that we will become possessive. We think of the church, for example, as our church and fail to see that it is the very body of Christ. We can be guilty of seeking to speak to the various challenges of the world not as Christ would lead us but in ways that are convenient or self-serving for ourselves. Our measure of success is no longer the Gospel admonition to make certain our relationships are all about reconciliation but about popular opinion. Or when we need to reach out to the needs of others, we place ourselves first. We begin to see stewardship as a burden instead of a joyful response to all that God has done.

It is not in just the area of the church that we become possessive. In our relationships with our families, we can easily place self before others. We can begin to take for granted the love that others have for us. Love is never a matter of meeting halfway; it is always a matter of going the extra mile. And when love is truly the motivator, the extra mile is never a burden. Each party must be open to repair and reconciliation if a relationship is going to be strong.

In our professional lives, we cease to seek ways to benefit our clients or customers or patients or students or parishioners and view the bottom line of profit as more important than service. Judge Elbert Tuttle in a commencement address at Emory University said, "It turns out that there is no right price for service, for what is a share of a person worth?"

God has expectations of us and of our relationships. Our world is not just a playground in which God lets us live. The commandments of scripture are a reminder that God has expectations or guard rails for the chosen, chosen not for privilege but for service. We have viewed the world as a Garden of Eden, not as a vineyard where vines must be tended and fruit comes from effort. God expects a fruitful harvest.

G. K. Chesterson wrote, "A man walking, comes to the edge of the cliff, and keeps walking, he will not break the law of gravity, he will prove it." Every time we break one of God’s laws, God’s commandments, the consequences prove that ruptured relationships hurt. Just like a broken arm hurts, a broken relationship brings pain. What was broken is this parable’s case was the relationship between those who were tenants (us) and the landlord (God). Broken relationships are not only painful, they cannot bear fruit. We miss out on the good things healthy relationships can produce: celebrations, advances in science and art, spiritual awakenings, growing fellowships of faith.

The allegory continues as Jesus says, “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” Anyone who turns away from the cornerstone, our rock and our redeemer forfeits the fruitfulness. Those who have ruptured relationship with the rock have been crushed.

When we turn to that stone that the builders rejected, it will break us down too – but only so that it can build us up again. The stone will take away our pride and prejudice, our sin and selfishness, our greed and guilt. Once we have been dressed down, the stone begins to build our lives upon a strong spiritual foundation. Every floor of that new spiritual building will be chock a block stocked with the invaluable fruits of the spirit – peace, joy, love, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, humility and self-control.

Our Presbytery supports a ministry called Lagom Landing, a gap year residential program providing 18-25 year olds a relationship with God’s servants as a foundation for the rest of their lives. Rock and Laurel welcome these young adults into their home and live, work, learn and play together. This summer at the graduation of their fifth class, one of the students shared:

When I first came to Lagom Landing I was so unsure of myself and who I was. Not to mention on the physical side I was pretty scrawny. In my high school since I didn’t learn the same way others did, I was perceived as stupid; eventually, I believed it.

Coming here gave me a whole new perspective of how intelligent I am and the different ways I learn, and that is completely normal for people to learn different ways.

This year I have been a part of building a giant wraparound deck with a roof, putting a roof on the neighbors’ trailer, helping frame an addition on a shed, remodeling a bathroom, (where I learned and did most of the plumbing), making 2 picture frames, a beautiful dining room table, and creating 2 bathrooms that started from a shack with a dirt floor. In these projects, I slowly grew confidence in myself, whether it was accurately reading a tape measure or driving a Sawzall, and these confidence boosters have transferred over to daily living. I stand up taller, I no longer ridicule myself, and I’m just overall happier.

Ever since I was little I was told I was either not smart enough to do something or not strong enough and no matter how hard I tried, people would take me away from it or replace me with someone else. I would second guess myself, my confidence completely dismantled from trying again something I failed the first time. This year, though, I was constantly encouraged to try things again once I failed or to try things that I was incredibly hesitant on.

Earlier this year I was driving the tractor and I got it really stuck on a log. While we were digging out the log I thought to myself “Well I guess I’m never driving the tractor again.” I expected Rock to tell someone else to get on the tractor. But once we got the log out from underneath the tractor, Rock told me to get right back on the tractor. This may have seemed insignificant to Rock but that moment made me realize someone did believe in me and my capabilities and that everybody makes mistakes.

Both Rock and Laurel have given me confidence that I never knew was achievable. They pushed me and even if I got frustrated at the time I appreciated it; it’s made me stronger and more of an independent thinker.

Matthew’s parable teaches us the relationships we have been gifted by God are meant to bear fruit.

I invite us to enter into and deepen these redemptive and reconciling relationships. Enjoy being fruitful!

Our Generosity Team has invited Andrea Wright to share how the relationships she has formed in this fellowship of faith have caused her to say yes and participate in our Stewardship Campaign.

Andrea’s witness…

Our faithful stewardship in response to God’s grace makes all these things possible.

1. Timothy Keller. Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City, p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)