

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, APRIL 29, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A very zealous soul-winning young preacher recently came upon a farmer working in his field. Being concerned about the farmer's soul the preacher asked the man, "Are you laboring in the vineyard of the Lord my good man?"

Not even looking at the preacher and continuing his work the farmer replied, "Naw, these are soybeans."

"You don't understand," said the preacher. "Are you a Christian?"

With the same amount of interest as his previous answer the farmer said, "Nope my name is Jones. You must be lookin' for Jim Christian. He lives a mile south of here."

The young determined preacher tried again asking the farmer, "Are you lost?"

"Naw! I've lived here all my life," answered the farmer.

"Are you prepared for the resurrection?" the frustrated preacher asked.

This caught the farmer's attention and he asked, "When's it gonna be?"

Thinking he had accomplished something the young preacher replied, "It could be today, tomorrow, or the next day." Taking a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiping his brow, the farmer remarked, "Well, don't mention it to my wife. She don't get out much and she'll wanna go all three days."

Here we are at the Fifth Sunday of Easter, and it seems as though we are in a waiting period once again. That may be because it is true - - there are three big feast days of the church looming ahead: Ascension Day (which is 40 days after Easter); Pentecost (which is 50 days after Easter); and the following Sunday that is very big among Protestant denominations - - Trinity Sunday. Then begins the very long period where we start the story all over again with the 26 or so Sundays which follow Pentecost and take us all the way to Advent. During this late Easter period we focus our attention on readings from *The Gospel of John* instead of the typical ones from *Mark* which is confusing because they carry us back to the week before Jesus' arrest and death on the cross. The arrangement of the lessons in this manner is done to get us to understand what happened in the resurrection, why it was important, what it means for our

future as Christians, how we will come to understand the man who is the Christ, and when the world that is to come will open its doors for believers to enter in. This week we hear Jesus explain John's agenda in what biblical criticism calls a very high Christology, in other words, an exalted understanding of who Jesus is and is to be for us, this time using vine and fruit of the vine metaphors to make his point. The preacher's study guide for this week puts it succinctly: "Christ the vine and we the branches are alive in each other, in the mystery of mutual abiding. Baptism makes us a part of Christ's living and life-giving self and makes us alive with Christ's life. As the vine brings food to the branches, Christ feeds us at his table. We are sent out to bear fruit for the life of the world.¹" All of which is a fancy and somewhat colluded way to say that because we know and love and live in Christ, we feed each other spiritually as well as feed the world around us just by being in relation, one with another. This relation is life-changing while at the same time life-affirming. We are called to participate in this joint relationship as a way of making the world whole and healed. It is our job, as I've mentioned before, as co-creators. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

We come together, seek to love one another, forge a way to heal the world because it is the essence of how God relates to us, the essence of love. Whenever we encounter love we know God has been there first, and God remains to assure us of how important it is that we are daily about loving activities. I'm not sure if you've ever framed your day in this manner, but when one plots out the minutes and hours based on how they relate to demonstrating love for another, or for God, time takes on new meaning. For instance, let's say that grocery shopping is to be part of the day's activities. Along with making a list of what you might need, could your list include calling a neighbor and asking if there is anything you might pick up for them; or maybe you might add to the list some canned goods or cereal or peanut butter for the food pantry; or perhaps while shopping you might add a card to a neighbor or a loved one who could use a lift. This is shopping with an eye towards and a heart focused on love. Just think if we all here at BBCC did this for just one day what a difference it could make, and the stories we'd hear of tenderness and appreciation. It's worth a try.

Let me give you an example of how I've seen it work in churches, large and small. I've shared this story with the outreach committee and some members of our board before but I think it deserves more detailed attention. The last congregation I served was not unlike BBCC; there were about 100 members, of who maybe half showed up on Sundays. Our budget was about \$185,000, which paid for a full-time clergyman, a parish secretary, an organist, and someone to clean the buildings. Our outreach budget was modest, about \$4500. Some folks had been saying for quite a while that they did not like the way we did outreach and the programs we selected to support. So I came up with an idea to get more folks involved in the process. First, I got the board to agree to hand over all \$4500 for the year to me in cash. The following Sunday I had an outreach altar call. I asked everyone to come forward and I gave each of them \$100.

Here was the catch. First, it did not belong to them, it belonged to God. Second, they were to find a way to pay it forward; in other words, use it help someone in need or some non-profit group or the man/woman on the street. Third, they were to come back and tell us how they used the money. Or, if they preferred, they could just put the \$100 back into the offertory basket and we'd find a way as a board to use the money. Many folks were shocked and did not want to take the responsibility of having to account for \$100 in cash; quite a few put the money back in the basket, citing this as a reason. (There is a great sermon opportunity here, but I'll leave it for another day.) But most folks seemed up to the challenge, pocketed the money, and began to plan how they would use it.

All week the phone lines of the congregation were abuzz with the ways in which members found to use their hot \$100! One fellow, Scott, bought 20 \$5 subs (we call them heros in New York), walked into the local shelter, and managed to feed everyone that evening (Sundays was usually a do-as-best-you-can night). He was in tears as he talked about handing out the sandwiches. The owner of the Subway Shop even threw in 20 bags of chips and 20 cookies to make the meal seem more attractive and wholesome.

Another woman, an eighty-five year old grandmother known as Nina, called her 5 children on the phone and asked to have a family meeting. She told them what she had been asked to do, and solicited their help. Each child then gave \$100 out of their pocket. As Nina had once been an elementary school teacher in Jamaica, they decided to pool their money to establish an essay contest at the nearby elementary school titled "What I would do if I had \$100," with first, second, and third prizes. The children who won were then asked to come to the church to read their essays. The first and second place winners did so, and then gave their prize money back to the church to do more good works. This so moved Nina and her family that, upon her death, they established a \$10,000 scholarship that still gives out monies to this day, nearly 20 years later.

A third man named Rob told of his escapades on that Sunday, how, having made his way to the airport, he was stuck in a long car line due to a man whose tire was flat. The man had no cell phone or triple A, so he was waiting for the police to come by. He had been waiting more than two hours, and his daughter was in the airport somewhere trying to track down the family member they had come to pick up. It just so happened that Rob had a cell phone and \$100 bill in his pocket. The long and short of it was that Rob made a phone call, used his AAA membership to have them come fix the tire, paid for it with the \$100 in his possession, and gave the rest for the gentleman and his family to get a pickup meal from a local food truck. The man insisted that he pay Rob back for his trouble, at which time Rob explained how he had come to have \$100 to share that day. To which the man said, "That's it! Please give me the name and address of your church so that I might thank them personally." Rob did so and they

parted ways. But sure enough the man and his entire family were in our church the following week, and got up to spoke about how this " \$100 Angel" had literally saved their lives that day. At the offertory, the man and his family came up and returned the \$100, asking that we find other good deeds to do with it, as we had been so thoughtful to begin the program.

And the list goes on, as folks for weeks got up to speak about how they had found ways to use the money. We never did it again (too much of a good thing, I think), but we figured that our \$4500 had brought about \$30,000 in returns, once we put a number to the giving and receiving. Recently Anthony and I participated in a pay it forward program at Mariner's Bethel Church in Ocean View, where they gave each of the congregants \$10, with amazing results, raising thousands of dollars for a youth ministry building they are constructing. We are a small group - - but think of what we might do! Good things come from and in small packages. We are the fruit on a long and faithful vine. If we remain in Christ and if Christ's words remain in us, we are told that we can ask whatever we wish, and it will be done for us. It is imperative that we keep the garden fertilized with new ideas, fresh initiatives and appetizing alternatives to what is "out there" but needs some revitalization! All to God's greater glory, so that we might bear much fruit, showing ourselves to be Disciples of Jesus and Disciples of Christ as well.

I end this week with a reflection by Alice Walker who wrote *The Color Purple*, among other stories. She imagines life as a gardener, and we the great tenders to the garden, saying

My desire
is always the same; wherever Life
deposits me:
I want to stick my toe
& soon my whole body
into the water.
I want to shake out a fat broom
& sweep dried leaves
bruised blossoms
dead insects
& dust.
I want to grow
something.
It seems impossible that desire
can sometimes transform into devotion;
but this has happened.
And that is how I've survived:

how the hole
I carefully tended
in the garden of my heart
grew a heart
to fill it.ⁱⁱ

May your hearts be filled with the love of God, and your body rejoice from its nurture. If faith, hope, love abide, but the greatest of these is love, may we love one another as Christ loves us in our relationship, one to the other as the gardener who loves the vine, the vine who in turn aches for the love of God's hand.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
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ⁱ Sundays and Seasons, p. 171.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/going-out-to-the-garden/#content>