

Sunday, April 28, 2024

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 139: 13–14

GOSPEL READING: John 15: 1–8

Sermon Series: Becoming: Fruitful

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are continuing with our Becoming Sermon Series which is a series designed to take us on a 50 day journey towards Pentecost that equates to be exactly 7 Sundays between Easter and Holy Pentecost which lands on May 19, 2024 this year.

- This week, our emphasis on “becoming” will be centered on the topic of Fruitfulness.
- I would like to start our conversation by exploring **what it means to be fruitful.**
- For us to understand the concept of what fruitfulness is, it might be helpful for us to explore the differences between being successful and being fruitful, for it may be tempting for us to assume that these two terms are one in the same.

- I have observed that **being successful and being fruitful** are often seen as parallel paths in the journey of life, each offering its own unique rewards and challenges.
- **Success is often equated** with achieving one's goals, reaching milestones, and attaining recognition or wealth. It's like climbing a mountain; you set a goal, you work hard, you overcome obstacles, and finally, you reach the summit.
- As I have preached before, Stephen and I climbed a mountain in Seattle when we were newly engaged and celebrated our engagement there with family.
- Stephen and I climbed Mt. Si together, a mountain that was supposed to be for beginners to intermediates.
- I still argue to this day that this was misleading and non-factual.
- I struggled to the point of having intermittent crying spells because I had no idea that climbing down a mountain was just as taxing as climbing up a mountain.

- It was nothing but our young love for one another and the sour patch candy that got us through that day, but as you see in the pictures, we had had smiles of success on our face for accomplishing such a feat.
- **Success Church is the satisfaction** of standing at the peak, knowing you've accomplished what you set out to do.
- It's about personal achievement and external validation.
- On the other hand, **being fruitful** is more about the journey itself, the process of growth, and the impact you have on others and the world around you.
- It's like tending to a garden; you plant seeds, nurture them with care, and watch them grow into something beautiful and beneficial.
- **Being fruitful** is not just about what you gain for yourself but also about what you give back to others.
- It's about leaving a positive legacy, making a difference, and contributing to the greater good.

- **While success may bring** temporary satisfaction and recognition, **being fruitful brings** lasting fulfillment and meaning.
- **Success may be measured by external standards, but being fruitful** is measured by the richness of our character, the depth of our relationships, and the positive influence you and I have on others.
- In essence, **success is about what we achieve, while being fruitful is about who we become** and how you and I impact the world around us.
- Striving for success is important, but striving to be fruitful is what truly brings purpose and fulfillment to our lives.
- Hence, the purpose of my taking time to have this conversation is to really expand on what we talked about from last week's sermon that focused on "Becoming Generous," because for me generosity and fruitfulness goes hand in hand.

- When you and I practice generosity—whether through giving of our time, resources, talents, or love—we are ultimately reflecting the very heart of God.
- As God’s children, we are called to conform to the image of Christ, and we are called to embody His selfless love and generosity in our own lives (Ephesians 5:1-2).
- When we live generously, we reflect God's character to the world and bear fruit that glorifies God.
- Our Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life Class spent much time reflecting on the moral moment and call to action that I simplified into one word last week...MORE!
- As the preacher, I took a scary leap of faith to ask from all of us **More**....more prayers, more presence, more gifts, more witness, and more service!
- It was a message where my sermonic feedback informed me that the sermon did not make anyone feel guilty...
- However, it was a sermon everyone named to be convicting because I don’t know about you, but

sometimes I fall into the trap of self-serving versus God-serving.

- Sometimes, I confuse pursuing success with pursuing fruitfulness.
- Hence, part of our quest for the More I talked about last week is calling ourselves to a deeper quest of searching, reflection, and sometimes even personal accountability so that we can become all that God has called us to be.
- For me, it is in the quest for more....you and I discover exactly who we are.
- We discover our strengths, we discover our weaknesses and or growing edges, we discover our resilience, we discover our capabilities;
- It is often in the more, we find our breakthroughs and we find our new beginnings;
- Tying our gospel more directly to our conversation, it **is in our quest for more**, that you and I may also discover the true nature of God in all of God's infinite wisdom and strength.

- Our Wednesday night class was really drawn to this vineyard imagery in our passage, for how could our Midwest roots not be captivated by what's going on in our passage, right?
- Our gospel paints a vivid picture of our relationship with Christ and the essential principle of bearing fruit.
- The fruit that our class identified this passage to be referencing is the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5: 22-23; *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness and self-control.*
- In the ancient agrarian society of Jesus' time, vineyards were common, and people understood the importance of vines and branches for sustenance and livelihood.
- Just as branches draw life from the vine, we are called to abide in Christ, to remain connected to Him in a deep and intimate relationship.
- This abiding involves daily communion through prayer, study of God's Word, and fellowship with other believers.

- When we abide in Christ, we experience His love, guidance, and empowerment to live fruitful lives.
- Another way for us to break down this concept of abide is an invitation for you and I to dwell in, remain in and be present in; to be held and kept in just as the branches must be attached to the vine in our story or it will bear no fruit.
- In our story, the vine is the source of life and nourishment for the branches.
- In the same way, Jesus is the source of spiritual life for believers. Apart from Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5).
- Just as branches rely on the vine for water, nutrients, and support, we depend on Christ for sustenance and spiritual vitality.
- And this, folks, is where things can become challenging for some of us. This idea that we can do nothing without Christ also posed some variant responses from our class.

- This is, furthermore, where I believe the tension of our story lies and a possible invitation for us to consider.
- Similar to how my faith journey aligns with the woman at the well who met a man named Jesus who offered me living water that will never have me experience spiritual thirst again—I, like the woman at the well, had a choice to make: would I take a drink?
- My answer to this invitation was yes, simply because when I revisited those fruits of the spirit for myself at the time, I felt there was a shortage....
- I always felt love from my family, but quite frankly, I wasn't sure I loved myself...
- **I seldom felt joy** before connecting in ministry,
- **I rarely had peace** before connecting in ministry,
- **I was losing my patience** because I couldn't find anything as meaningful as the ministry of Jesus...
- **My kindness and goodness** felt meaningless because, at the time, I had no idea how to connect those qualities with something valuable and meaningful in my life,

- **I didn't understand** the concept of faithfulness until I connected with Jesus,
- **Nothing in my life felt gentle** when I was just trying to survive without Jesus,
- And I won't even venture into the topic of self-control because, as I stated earlier, I was the woman at the well who had made many mistakes;
- However, it is my Black ancestral roots where my embedded theology still reigns true, that just a little talk with Jesus will make it right!
- The invitation of our gospel that aligns with our Wesleyan roots of scripture, reason, tradition, and experience invites each one of us to take a similar step of faith or mustard seed of consideration to discover for ourselves a powerful connection that can transform our life encounters and endeavors.
- **Being connected to the vine** allows us to discover God's refuge and strength, a present help in times of trouble... (Ps 46:1)

- **Being connected to the vine** teaches us to anchor our souls on the rock in which we stand firm amidst life's storms;
- **Being connected to the vine** teaches us to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds because testing our faith through this connection produces perseverance.
- **Being connected to the vine** reveals how to lead despite our fears and uncertainties and face our future with strength, hope, and optimism.
- **Being connected to the vine** illumines and clarifies verse 7 of our gospel, which says to *ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you;*
- For **it is in the vine** where we find more clarity,
- **In the vine**, we see more clearly,
- **In the vine**, we hear that inner voice that has always been leading our way to glorify God and all of God's creation, to serve others and love our neighbors, and to align our lives with these purposes as we continue to discover a fulfillment, meaning and joy we could ever imagine;

Thank you, Lord, for making us all so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well we know it.