

Sermon Proper 11, Year B, 2024; Gospel: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

### **The Way and It's Fruits**

I can just imagine that scene with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. But first, a little context. Jesus and his disciples have been all over Galilee and into the region beyond. His ministry has taken off. People are getting healed from their illnesses. Using parables he is teaching them about the kingdom of God. They had crossed over the Sea of Galilee before into the land of the gentiles where Jesus encountered and healed the man who called himself "Legion." He had healed the synagogue leader Jairus' daughter, rescuing her from death; and the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years who was healed by just touching his cloak. Large crowds followed him everywhere. The only place he was not received well was in his hometown Nazareth, yet he kept moving forward, sending his disciples out to spread the word. Then came the news of the tragic death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod Antipas. Jesus was devastated. He and his disciples needed some rest. Jesus tells his disciples "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." So they get into a boat by themselves in hopes of finding a remote place for some rest. But a huge crowd of people see them and recognize them, and run along the shore, watching their boat out in the sea as they go, and are there to meet them when they bring the boat ashore. Five thousand people greet Jesus. "Are you kidding me?" his disciples must be thinking, "we can't go anywhere for peace and quiet." No, Jesus and the disciples can't get away by themselves. Perhaps later, but not now, because Jesus sees all these people, and has compassion for them, and begins to teach them many things. What does he tell them? Mark doesn't say. We might infer from Jesus' other teachings and actions what he may have said to them, but here at this point in Mark we just don't know. He had been using parables to teach about the Kingdom of God, and he had performed healings, in all of this trying to show his followers what this new world, this kingdom would look like. It was a world full of new

possibilities, a world of fairness and justice, a world without oppression by the ruling Romans, a world without unjust control by their religious leaders. It was also a world of equity, of healing and wholeness, a world of love. Perhaps Jesus was trying to teach them how each one of them could become more like the people God created them to be, more like the Christ Jesus himself.

Christlikeness, or as Richard Rohr and so many others have said, to allow the Christ already present within each of us to transform us so that this Christ can act through us to change the world, to make it the kind of world God intends, people transformed into the image of Christ. What would that look like?

Father Thomas Keating was a priest and theologian who once wrote that the first indication that we have been transformed in Christ is the spiritual fruits evident in the way we live. How many of you remember what are called the Fruits of the Spirit? It is St. Paul who used that expression “fruit of the Spirit” in his letter to the Galatians, where he listed the fruits as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Eugene Peterson in his Bible translation named The Message interprets the fruits of the Spirit like this: “But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life....” Use your imagination. Perhaps this is the kind of message Jesus by his words and his actions is teaching these people on that shoreline. Peterson goes further in his interpretation of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, saying “Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more

interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.” I will add this: The Christ lives within each of us. If we choose to live these lives as the Christ is calling us to do, then I think Paul was right. I think that what we will experience is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control. Those are the fruits.

It sounds attractive, so simple, doesn't it? Who would not want to experience these kinds of fruits in their lives? And yet the religion of Christianity is not doing so well, at least not if you look at statistics showing decreasing numbers of people who identify as being Christian or of any established religion, church membership dropping, the dwindling number of people at church services, and more young people saying they are “spiritual but not religious.” And I get it. Cynthia and I have four children, and two would say that. And it is no wonder. There is a very loud voice out there today, claiming to be the voice of God and the Christ Jesus, a voice that turns many away from our faith. It is the voice of the so-called modern Evangelical movement, the voice that somehow interprets scripture as saying that America is now the chosen kingdom of God, a land set apart, a nation uniquely blessed, a people with a special covenant with God, and also, I might add, a place where many are not welcome, many are excluded. Now I am not up here to belittle or criticize love for our country, but this kind of love of country has given way to a nationalist fervor, a reckless mean-spirited idolatry that trivializes the Christ Jesus, his authentic words, the kingdom of God he tried and is trying to usher in. It is a militaristic voice that ignores his plea for love, peace, kindness, goodness, inclusivity, nonviolence. In the words of Tim Alberta in his book The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory, “American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism,” we are in a strange new environment in which loving your enemies is “woke” and “owning the libs” is the answer to “What would Jesus do?” It is called the Christian Nationalist movement. We see it in the halls of our congress. We see it reflected in rulings and opinions of our judicial system. We have seen it and may see it again in the

White House. I don't see much spiritual fruit in the words of these people. Who among us would want to be a part of this so-called Christian movement? I know my children do not, and neither do millions of other young people searching for a spiritual dimension in their lives. I found a quote by C.S. Lewis in his book The Great Divorce that I think is appropriate here: "There have been men before... who get so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God himself... There have been some who were so preoccupied with spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ." There has been a reaction to this so-called Christian movement. There are voices speaking out against the nationalistic fervor at work to change the Christ Jesus into its own image. Our Beth Murray group recently finished the book by Jim Wallis called The False White Gospel "Rejecting Christian Nationalism, Reclaiming True Faith, and Refounding Democracy." It is a refreshing counter to the false claims of Christian Nationalism, and offers hope in recapturing the true message of Jesus.

As I've told you before, Frederick Buechner was one of my favorite authors and theologians. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and the author of 39 books. Cynthia and I start most of our mornings by reading aloud to each other, and one of the reflections we are now reading is Buechner's book called Beyond Words, A Word a Day to Keep the Demons at Bay. In it are short meditations about all sorts of things. A few days ago his reflection was on the word Christian, and it gets at his idea about what being a Christian means. Here is what he says: "Some think a Christian is one who necessarily *believes* certain things. That Jesus was the son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin. Or that all other religions are wrong... some think a Christian is one who necessarily *does* certain things, such as going to church, getting baptized, reading the Bible, doing a good deed a day... What Jesus said is 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'... he didn't say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that he was. He didn't say that it was by believing

or doing anything in particular that you could “come to the Father.” He said that it was only by him—by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way. Thus it is possible to be on Christ’s way and with his mark upon you without ever having heard of Christ... A Christian is one who is on the way, though not necessarily very far along it...”

I agree with most of what Buechner says. I like to think of the message and the life of Jesus as “The Way.” And I think that the bottom-line message he was teaching to those people on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that afternoon was to live like he did. And I think Paul was right when he wrote about what that looks like: Love one another, be joyful, be at peace, be patient, be kind, be good, be gentle, be faithful. That is “the Way.” It’s not always easy, but it really is pretty simple.