

On Productivity

Critical Words of Jesus:

John 15:5-8

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Bethany Church

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It's difficult to match the satisfaction you feel, when your efforts bear fruit and make a difference. Wasn't it Hannibal who said in the old show *The A-Team*, "There's nothing like a good plan coming together?" When Jesus saw what his faith and work accomplished in a Samaritan woman, he told his disciples that he had eaten food they didn't know about.

For eleven years I lived in a farming community. The mood was amazing when a bumper crop was brought to the elevator. No one wanted to brag, but there were a lot of smiles. The smiles grew when the bumper crop was matched with good prices; but regardless of price, producing a crop was a thing of pride. I did, however, witness many mishaps. In 1993, our farming community suffered floods. One of my parishioners had four hundred acres under water three times that summer. When fall came, an early frost killed all the crops he and others replanted. Another summer there was no rain. The only families breaking even that year had collected insurance money when hail wiped out some fields. You can imagine how deflating it is to invest so much time, energy, money and skill, and then have nothing to show. Some of us have experienced this frustration and discouragement in our vocations. We've given our time and our hearts, only to be passed over or dismissed. Some of us have suffered this in their marriages and families. We've worked and wept and sacrificed and persevered only to see our dreams disappear and our hopes evaporate. All over the world, as some congregations grow

rapidly, others struggle, divide and decline. Reasons vary, but the feeling is the same. All the energy, all the effort seems to be expended for naught.

When your efforts come to naught, you feel like men who fished all night and caught nothing. In Luke, chapter five, Jesus told them to fish again. Discouraged and reluctant they did as Jesus directed, and their nets were filled to breaking. Can you imagine how their hearts pounded? They must have thought, “With this guy we could be rich!” However, they ended up leaving their boats and becoming disciples who fished for men.

Is that a picture of what God can do for our work, relationships and church? It happened again. After Jesus’ resurrection (in John, chapter 21) Peter and six others go fishing, work all night and catch nothing. Our risen Lord tells them to switch the nets to the other side of the boat; and when they do, they catch 153 fish without breaking their nets.

That may seem unreal, but God fed the people of Israel with manna for 40 years and gave them victory over enemies who held tremendous advantage. Isn’t this God’s word to us? Isn’t God offering us a message with these words about the nature of our lives? For all these people there were times of testing, times of want and times of monotony; yet God showed them who is in control. God gave these words to give us courage and direction.

Jesus taught his disciples about productivity. As he called his disciples to leave the Upper Room, where they just had eaten the Passover Meal and where Jesus had transformed it into a service of Holy Communion, Jesus said:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (John 15:1-4, NIV)

Jesus claims that he is the true vine for life and all of God's blessing. Our heavenly Father is the gardener. When we connect with Jesus, there is life and everything necessary for productivity.

Let's digress a moment. Business productivity is different on the streets of Baghdad or Beirut than it is on the streets of Rochester. Family productivity is different in the slums of Chicago and Mexico City than in the neighborhoods of Rochester. The conditions of the soil affect what is planted and what work is needed. Likewise, the soil of our hearts describes our connection to the vine of life. Is there stuff in our hearts that are obstacles or that is hostile to what comes from Jesus?

In the soil metaphor there may be rocks, "misbeliefs" that poison our faith. There may be weeds, desires that hijack our focus on Christ's word. There may be acid (old hurts, bitterness and condemnation), which rejects relationships that carry life to us.

Using the metaphor of the vine, following that first communion service, Jesus said his Father cuts off branches that don't bear fruit. I suggest that our presence here today, in Christ's church, indicates that we have not yet been cut off. However, we all are being pruned by our Father. Wherever there is conflict or heat in our lives, we are being called to both reassess and focus on Jesus and his word. We're being pruned to both become and produce something marvelous. Whether you are right or wrong, the conflict is part of your and my pruning.

The mark of a true disciple is not our activity. All people fill their lives with activity... even if it's sleeping. Does it really matter if I work unceasingly and accomplish nothing? Isn't there a point to any effort made?

A film came out this past winter called *Glory Road*. It captured one of the most pivotal sporting events in the history of our country. In the 1966 college basketball national

championship game Coach Don Haskins, fully aware of the racial bigotry, chose to start an all black lineup from little-known Texas Western University against an all white lineup from perennial powerhouse University of Kentucky. The underdog team won. The movie compresses the story. Don Haskins actually had coached the team for four years and felt he could have won the championship in 1964 had he not lost a star player to injury. The effort was difficult, challenging and critical; but with the effort and favor, there were results that changed everything.

In John 15:5-8, Jesus says the key to productivity is to “remain” in him and him in us. Effort is important, but God’s favor is critical. Jesus says that it is to the Father’s glory that we bear much fruit.

How do we remain in Jesus and Jesus in us? Jesus modeled this in his relationship with the Father. He kept his focus on God’s word and will for his life, and through eyes of faith he saw God’s activity in his world. Jesus’ disciples also devoted themselves to the word of their heavenly Father, and they identified his hand, indeed his Spirit, at work among them.

I don’t want to minimize effort. Lack of diligence honors no one. God certainly doesn’t reward it, and Jesus certainly doesn’t model it. Don Haskins’ basketball team seemingly outworked everyone; although he may not have. With favor and effort he did reach the pinnacle of basketball. Although there were believers, his team was neither expressly nor completely devoted to Jesus; yet their efforts blessed our world. In contrast, when our efforts are expressly drawn from Jesus and pruned by our Father, they carry a cure for the toxins that hurt the soul. They not only reveal human potential as Haskins team did; they display human purpose and divine love. That is God’s will for you and me.

Truly, we are not called to work for God. We are called to work with God and bear fruit in whatever soil he plants us.