

At our Bible exploration this week, we were talking about the early Christian communities, and how they had plenty of arguments and fighting, over fine points of doctrines. One person attending said, Gee, things have not changed much over all these years. Yes, followers of Jesus are still disagreeing often about many things. But this morning we have a fairly straightforward teaching: Jesus tells his followers to “Go and Bear Fruit!” The WAY of Jesus is clear: putting love into action, making peace as an action, liberating those who are captives, visiting those who are sick... all actions, or “bearing” fruit! Symbols are powerful forces, so Jesus uses symbols from nature all the time. To bear much fruit, we know that a fruit tree or grape vine needs healthy soil, plenty of water, fertilizer, sunlight, even pruning, etc. Gardners know that to have an abundant harvest, it takes plenty of hard work and effort!

Fruit is the symbol, and a symbols point to deeper realities; for Jesus, the principal fruit would be Love. Over and over in John he says “This is my commandment that you Love one another!” In Galatians Chapter 5 the apostle Paul lists nine “fruits of the Spirit.” There are surely many more fruits of the Spirit, but these nine are good to consider, even memorize. Check them out, maybe read them out loud, whenever you see the wallhanging in our parlor next door: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” They are all elusive, hard to live out daily... Yes, when we do not exercise some self-control, the ego and self-centeredness come to the fore,” Yes, we have to work at getting self out of the center, and truly looking to the needs of others. Even in something as simple as a conversation, it can take effort to be quiet, to listen more, to be sure that all parties have time to speak. Self-control.

Brian McLaren is modern day prophet, former church pastor, who wanted to bear more spiritual fruit around the world. He is one the leaders these days in emphasizing that Jesus’ message and gift to the world is much more than an individual salvation, and surely much more than “where we go after we die.” McLaren would be considered a leader in “Progressive Christianity” which will emphasize spiritual progress in THIS world... for entire communities and nations. He joins other progressive Christian leaders in reminding us that the “Kingdom of God” Jesus spoke of was God’s will to be done “ON EARTH as it is in heaven.” In this sense, Jesus was a “revolutionary” of sorts, a change agent to make the world a better place. One of Brian McLaren’s book’s is called “*Everything must change.*”

When McLaren was visiting Burundi in East Africa, he heard a preacher’s son say that he only heard one basic sermon message his whole life: *“You are a sinner; you need to repent and believe in Jesus; Jesus could come back today, and if you are not ready, you will burn in hell.”* Having lived through the genocide of 1994 between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes, he reflected: *so much death, so much hatred between tribes, so much poverty, suffering, injustice, and nothing ever really changed. I had never heard a sermon that addressed these realities. Did God only care about our souls going to heaven after we died? Were our hungry bellies unimportant to God? Was God unconcerned about our crying sons and daughters, our mother hiding under beds, our fathers unable to sleep because of a gun fire?... Or did god send Jesus to teach us how to avoid genocide by learning to love each other, how to overcome tribalism by following his path, how to make a better life here on earth - here in East Africa?* Burundi and Rwanda, among poorest countries of East Africa, are needing more than a message about individual souls and heaven, but a message of communal, systemic change from the Spirit of Jesus, who came for the poor and to liberate those who are oppressed.

We need to continually ask ourselves, “who are the poor or oppressed in our own country?” And what have we done or left undone to participate in injustice and what can we do to help liberate any oppressed? McLaren continues prophetically, to us: *Did North American church leaders teach the early colonists to treat the native peoples with love and respect? Did they consistently oppose slavery because it was an assault on the dignity of fellow human beings? Later in our history, did they express outrage over the exploitation of factory workers or the second-class status of women? Did they stand up for refugees and immigrants? Did they oppose white privilege, anti-Semitism, stereotyping of Muslims, and other forms of ethnic prejudice?*

Let me pause for a moment on his phrase “second-class status of women”... to say, on this Mother’s Day, that we that we *know* women do most of the work in raising children... nursing, bathing, feeding, etc. Women are said to still do most of the work in churches, yet we know they are not treated equally outside the home. Modern day prophets will say unapologetically that the Bible has a patriarchal bias... even Jesus’ Jewish faith was based admission on things like circumcision which had only to do with males, and the women were counted secondarily. We remember Paul saying that women should not teach in the temples, but learn

quietly at home. Modern day prophets use language that reflects progress in gender issues. You may have noticed that our opening hymn addressed God as Loving Spirit, Father-Mother. Most agree that the invisible Creator of the universe is in no way male. Yet progressive thinkers don't eliminate the metaphor of Father; we talk about “adding” words or metaphors to Speak of God, one of which is surely “Mother.” The UCC is one of the churches that has many creative ways to address God: Holy One, Loving God, Loving Spirit (as we saw in opening hymn) just to mention a few. Less favored words are Lord, Master, King, since they can imply domination, usually male domination.

On this Mother's Day, some are forwarding a re-mix of the “We Are the World” song, now 35 years ago. Famous singers from all over the world collaborated for that Live Aid Concert... Such passion for change as they sing “we are the ones to make a better day.” Can you imagine if nations' leaders would sing together, or as Dr. Bernie Siegel once said, share photos and stories of their grandchildren with each other! Do you know that when I first heard Siegel say this, my mind did go to MEN with gray hair sharing grandkid photos! Would be an amazing sight! But even more amazing and good for the world, would be the vision of WOMEN leaders, mothers and grandmothers, sharing their photos and videos of grandchildren! Could there be as many wars between nations and tribes if that kind of sharing was going on at world summits??? I think not! Love, hope, and joy about children and grandchildren is common to cultures all over the world and could be a uniting force as we all consider future generations.

Modern day prophets are the ones who constantly remind us to bear fruit, to put love into action. As you have heard, there are Christian leaders like Brian McLaren who envision new movements for justice, new words and language, new understandings of Jesus to make our faith more relevant, more real, since Jesus was incredibly real, relevant and radical about the issues of his day. We have to look no further than our own United Church of Christ for cutting edge voices. The UCC has always had prophetic voices addressing many forms of injustice and oppression.

Just this past week, on Cinco de Mayo, I was listening to a Zoom webinar at Grace Community Boston. It is an unapologetically progressive Christian community that is becoming more and more diverse in its membership. One discussion was about the Bible... which we know has been quoted often to justify

slavery, exclusive communities, women as second class, judgment against same-sex love, etc. How refreshing to hear progressive theologians speak of the variety of interpretations of the Bible, since the Bible was written indeed by fallible human beings, has many passages that soar with glorious inspiration for truth and love and peace, and some violent and abusive passages that make your head spin. One modern theologian wrote a book called “Texts of Terror.” Unapologetic voices that know if we are to make any significant changes in this world toward more peace, the Bible is one place to start, admitting that it has many protagonists and writers about God that were very unloving, even cruel.

To bear the fruits of patience and kindness, faithfulness and gentleness can start with approaching the Bible with careful attention to context, to the growing edges of Biblical characters. And the Good News is that we ALL have potential to “bear more fruit.” We hear that the apostle Peter became very good preacher, and that the Holy Spirit fell on ALL who heard him one day. Peter’s words about Jesus’ life and teachings came with power to transform minds and hearts. Words do matter; we know the words can cause hatred and destruction. So we emphasize and rehearse “words of life.” When Jesus says, Go and bear fruit, let’s rehearse (repeat) again what he could mean by fruit: “love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control!” Just as there are many kinds of fruit, there are many words we could add: Truth, Justice, equity, Dialogue, understanding, forgiving hearts and on and on. Use the most important words of your faith over and over until they are deep in your psyche or soul. I need to keep working on this for myself... One of the sayings I want to have on the tip of my tongue is that Jesus’ love was an INCLUSIVE LOVE. Then I want Paul’s famous words about love on the tip of my tongue, that Love is PATIENT AND KIND.

Pick your fruit, pick your words, but Go and bear more fruit! Amen.