

“Kingdom Trees”

Introduction: Over the course of the last few weeks we’ve been hearing some challenging words from Jesus as he’s begun to unfold for his followers what life lived in the beauty of the kingdom of God is to look like. His words are challenging because they’ve called us to use our comfort to care for those who are afflicted. His words have called us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. And last week we heard his words call us to refrain from judgmentalism and criticism toward those who rub us the wrong way and extend instead forgiveness and generosity.

This kind of life is so completely counter-cultural, so totally counter-intuitive that we don’t just need to download “an app for that,” as the saying goes; we need an entirely new operating system, an entirely new heart from which these kingdom values, attitudes, and actions that Jesus is inviting us into will flow. We’ll also need the transforming presence and power of the Holy Spirit to help us operate that heart and keep it well tuned. To get us thinking in this direction, Jesus turns our attention to trees and their fruit.

I. Trees and their Fruit

A. On the surface, it’s a simple proverb that Jesus lays before his listeners: “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.” If a tree is rotten, if its root system has shriveled or dried up, you can be sure that it will be unable to produce edible fruit. Conversely, if the soil and root system and branches have been properly cared for and nourished, it’s a good bet that the fruit hanging from its branches will taste wonderfully fresh and delicious.

B. So far so good. Jesus goes on: “Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars.” There is, Jesus is saying, a definitive link, not only between the health of the tree and its fruit, but also between the kind of tree it is and its fruit. Do you want to know what kind of tree it is that you’re looking at? Just like a good forest ranger can identify a deciduous tree by the kind of leaves its branches carry, so can one identify a fruit tree by checking its fruit. Do you see figs? Well, you’re looking at a fig tree, not a thornbush. Do you see grapes? Well it’s pretty clear you’re not looking at a briar patch.

II. People and their Hearts

A. Now, things begin to get interesting when Jesus applies these analogies to people, and in particular, to the human heart. The heart, in biblical understanding, is not the place where mushy emotions reside. Rather, it is the control center of an individual from which our values, attitudes, and actions flow. So, one who has a “good” heart is one from whom good things will flow. Conversely, one who has an “evil” heart is one from whom evil things can be expected. Pushing the analogy to its next step, what others see and hear flowing from us, what kind of fruit is observed, will reveal what kind of person we truly are.

B. What does good and bad fruit look like in our lives? In its immediate context, it’s just what we’ve heard Jesus talking about, from caring for those in need, to loving our enemies, to extending forgiveness and generosity. As we work our way out from there, the image of fruit is picked up by Paul, and perhaps most succinctly summarized by him, in his classic description of Christian character: “The

fruit of the Spirit [the character of one whose heart is controlled and shaped by the Holy Spirit] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” In that same section of his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes bad fruit to include sexual immorality, idolatry, witchcraft, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, envy and drunkenness, concluding that those who live like this will have no place in the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:13-26).

C. While good fruit includes both deeds and words, Jesus concludes by identifying the mouth, what we say, as a significant barometer of what resides in our heart: “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Lk. 6:45b). Do we listen to what we say? How are we speaking about others, especially those who are different than us? How do we talk about those from a different religion, a different race, a different country, a different gender, a different sexual orientation, a different political party, even a different church? What would someone who overheard us talking at a party think about what was in our heart, given what they were hearing us say? What kind of person would they identify us to be? What comes out of our mouth, Jesus says, can point us toward the heart work that must be done if the character of the kingdom of God is to be revealed through us.

III. Developing a Kingdom Heart

A. How do we develop a kingdom heart, a heart from which the values, attitudes, and actions about which Jesus is talking, can flow? Jesus promises that when we turn to him in repentance and faith, he makes us new, including the gift of a new heart—a new operating system—as well as the presence and power of the Holy Spirit who helps us learn how to care for and use this new heart. Paul puts it this way to the Christians in Philippi, as he encourages them to explore and put into practice this gift:

... work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. [Phil. 2:12-13]

Take this task seriously, Paul says (“with fear and trembling”) and know that you’re not doing it alone, but that the Holy Spirit comes alongside you as your personal spiritual trainer (“for it is God who works in you”).

B. This season called Lent, as we join with Jesus on his journey toward the cross and resurrection, is actually a good time to think about this. What do we need to put to death so that new life can emerge? Consider the invitation into this season, as found in the Ash Wednesday liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer (p. 265): “I invite you, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” This is heart work. These are practices through which we can make space for God’s Spirit to show us how our new heart works, and for keeping it tuned up as we go.

C. Some of these practices are called “disciplines of abstinence.” They’re about giving things up, a common theme in Lent: “What are you giving up for Lent,” we’re sometimes asked. Typically, our response might be something we love, like chocolate, because we think we should at least try to give something up, and we hope we can gut it out until the Easter Egg hunt begins! But disciplines of abstinence are much more helpful to us if we can think of them as heart work, as helping us to face the hold that unhealthy patterns might have on us, to name the idols in our lives that consume our time and energy and use that time instead to allow God to show us what life could be like without them.

D. A writer named Ruth Haley Barton describes our Lenten heart work in this way:

I want to enter into Lenten disciplines that correspond to the places in my life that cry out for deeper levels of transformation. The dynamics of Lent have to do with abstaining from the ways we normally distract ourselves from spiritual reality—the reality of our sin and the deeply patterned behaviors that keep us from our calling to follow Christ. . . We fast from what is temporal and material so that the inner person can be filled with the power of the Spirit.

- So, for instance, if you struggle with having a loose or critical tongue, you might consider spending some extended time in silence, or going a few days without saying anything negative. What is God showing you as you do that?

- If you struggle with ego or pride, you might find ways to serve others and not tell anyone about it, allowing God to be your only cheerleader.

- If you tend toward gluttony of some kind, and that can range from food to social media, you might try to fast from such one day a week.

- If you're prone to seek outside stimulants to keep you going, like coffee, Mountain Dew, or 5 Hour Energy, because you're not getting enough rest, you might try to set those aside and go to bed earlier.

- If you find yourself seeking retail therapy on a regular basis you might abstain from television or other screens in your life that continually lure you with what you supposedly can't do without and need to be truly happy.

As you set things aside, whatever they may be, fill the space that results with prayer, and with reading and meditating on God's word. Like a good farmer, the cultivation of your heart begins to make space for the seed that is the word of God to take root. As our reading from Isaiah declares, just as rain and snow reliably water the ground, transforming the earth and bringing life, so, too is God's word generative. It goes out from him to help us, as we yield to it, bloom with life and accomplish his purposes.

As we work out our salvation, as we seek to cultivate our hearts so that we can live out the fruitful kingdom values, attitudes and actions to which Jesus calls us, here are a couple of questions to take into this Lenten season:

1. Where do I need to acknowledge what is distracting or preventing me from realizing God's best for my life and his kingdom?

2. What one or two spiritual practices will help me to make space for God's Spirit to bring healing in those areas of my life?