

## Two Lessons from Trees.

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year C. February 11, 2007. (Texts: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:39-49)*

Thirty years ago I moved from a church in suburban Denver to become rector of a parish in the panhandle of Florida. I had never lived in that part of the country before, and when I got there I was amazed by the profusion of green, growing things everywhere. I hadn't realized how *brown* Colorado is until I moved into the semi-jungle of the Florida Gulf Coast. (Of course, I noticed all the different kinds of bugs, too. And I remembered how few of those we'd had to face in Colorado.) Around back of my new house were two strange, spiny, tropical trees. Somebody told me these were grapefruit trees. I thought, "How cool is that? We're going to have our own fresh squeezed grapefruit, right from the backyard!"

We moved into the house in December, and so I figured it would be a few months before I could start picking delicious grapefruit from our own trees. But nothing happened. No fruit. Not in the spring; not in the summer; not in the fall. Our senior warden ran a nursery, so I finally asked him about the trees. He said, "Oh, we're too far north up here in Bay County for grapefruit trees to do anything but make leaves." Swell. Just leaves, no fruit. — And the leaves weren't even pretty. So I dug those suckers up and planted flowers.

There are quite a few references to trees and fruit in the Bible. Three are found in the readings for today: in the Old Testament, the Psalm, and the Gospel. I want to say something about two of them – the one from the prophet Jeremiah and the one from Jesus. My comments will probably sound like two separate but related "mini-sermons." Therefore, I'm calling this "Two Lessons from Trees." The first starts with the words of a prophet who lived nearly 600 years before Christ, Jeremiah. He said, "*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.*"

You can use trees and their fruit-bearing as an analogy for Christians and our life in the world. We're like trees, in some ways. That is to say, we all have the potential to produce some kind of fruit, but to do so we have to be "planted" in the right place.

Jeremiah said that those who trust in the Lord are like "*trees planted by water, sending out their roots by the stream.*" They can survive in the drought and in the heat. And they don't cease to bear fruit. One of the men in our Wednesday morning Men's Bible Study told us this week that he was on a desert hike in Utah once and encountered an enormous old tree – maybe ten or twelve feet in diameter – growing in the sand beside an arroyo. There was no visible water; the stream-bed was dry. But the tree had sunk its roots down into the water that was under that arroyo a couple of feet, and the water nourished the tree so it stayed green, even in the blazing heat of the desert.

Part of the church's job is to be a stream where the water of life flows (even if it isn't always readily apparent), to be a place where people can sink their roots into well-watered ground and draw strength that will enable them to survive – even flourish – in times of crisis, fear, and the threat of death. Last Sunday morning when we learned right here in church, during the eight o'clock service, that our friend and fellow church-member Keith Gardner was critically ill and might not make it, this congregation began to pray very intentionally for him. And we've continued to pray all through this past week. Keith's wife, Margo, told me on Thursday that she figured that it was about the time when we were praying so hard for him last Sunday morning and afternoon that he began to come back from the "edge". As of today, he has come a long way back and has even started to talk about coming home, although that's not yet part of the doctor's plan.

Last Sunday morning, Keith's doctor told Margo to gather the family, and if a priest was coming for Last Rites, he should "come now." I don't deny the powerful effect of what the doctors have been doing for Keith over at St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction. Obviously, the medical care has been superb. But things changed a lot for Keith when Christ Church began to pray.

The Gardners are like trees planted by a stream — and this congregation is the stream. They endure in the drought, and they don't stop bearing their fruit. The prayers have helped Keith heal quickly. And the support and love of our community has been like life-giving water for Margo, offering her strength and encouragement to go through this frightening experience alongside her husband.

Do you know what you're hearing? You're hearing a true story about a church that's doing its job — a church doing what it's supposed to do, being what it's supposed to be — a point of access to the creative, nurturing, healing power of Christ. And I have no doubt that there's going to be even more fruit borne out of this experience, fruit borne by all of us "trees planted by the riverside."

Here's my second mini-sermon. In the part of Luke's gospel we heard this morning there's another saying about trees, this one from the lips of Jesus: "*No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.*"

Jesus said that a tree is known by its fruit — not by its leaves or its bark. That's obvious. Using the Biblical analogy, I've already spoken of individual Christians as "trees," trees planted by the stream of living water, bearing their fruit in due season. But to alter the metaphor a bit, there's also a sense in which each church, each congregation, is also like a fruit-bearing tree. What would you say is the "fruit" that *our* church is known for? Or — better — what's the kind of fruit we'd *like* to be known for?

Maybe we'd like to be known as a congregation where people learn to pray — to intercede for human needs with grace and power — a church where, when its members pray, things *happen*. Can you imagine an Episcopal Church (an *Episcopal* Church!) like that?

Perhaps we'd enjoy being known as a church that empowers its members for service — not just in the traditional ministries of the congregation, but in fresh and creative ways that have an impact on the community around us and the world beyond us — a church through which God works to give men and women the vision, energy, and will to "pour themselves out" for others' sake.

Or, again, we might want the world to know us as a church where anyone can find a home, anyone at all, no matter who they are, or where they're from, or what their antecedents might be — a church where there is neither an "in crowd" nor a "fringe group," but a single, loving, welcoming family of brothers and sisters who share a unity forged not by the habit of "thinking inside the same box," but by the Spirit of God.

How do we decide by what kind of fruit we want to be known? It's too bad that trees can only bear one kind of fruit. There are grapefruit trees and cherry trees and fig trees, but there aren't — to my knowledge — trees that have grapefruit on some branches, cherries on others, and figs on the rest. But, you know, *God* can do anything — even make trees that yield more than a single kind of fruit.

I see fruit being borne by our life together in Christ, and I believe you're able to see it too. But the more our faith grows, the more different kinds of fruit this tree called Christ Church in Aspen can bear. All things are possible to God!