

“Speckled Fruit”

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Epiphany 8, Transformation Sunday - Year C,

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Isaiah 55:10-13 NIV / Luke 6:39-49 NRSV

So when we think of really good fruit, what images come to mind?

Think of an apple. What kind of image do you think of as a really good looking apple.

Or a banana. What kind of banana do you imagine as good looking.

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For most of us, I would guess it's the ones that are clean, bright and shiny,

the ones without bruises or spots, the ones without blemish.

After all, isn't that kind of what we're taught, either by our parents or our culture.

When we see commercials on television,

is the food they present to us discolored or blemished, or is it pristine?

In fact, much of what we see in advertisements isn't even food at all.

It's substances meant to be the ideal of what we think of as perfect food.

Glue or paint used instead of milk in cereal commercials

because milk isn't white enough to be milk.

Apples and pears at the grocery store with a coating of paraffin

to make them as shiny as we think they should be to be appealing.

Bananas that are kept hermetically sealed in refrigeration

until the moment they are put on the shelf, so they don't have ripe spots,

yet they go from green to brown in days.

Certainly there appears to be a gap between what our ideal is and what occurs in reality.

Yet when we are shopping for our food, we constantly seek that perfect ideal.

We'll pick through the fruit seeking that perfect apple,
that perfect plum or banana.

Yet how often do we find that perfection?

Even though we may find something that looks unblemished on the outside,
we get it home and lo and behold, under the skin or rind,
those bruises and imperfections show themselves.

Clearly we often have an unrealistic idea of perfection in our food.

But it is just limited to our food, or could the same be argued of our opinions of each other as well?

Do we have realistic expectations of each other and all our flaws,
or are we looking for those without blemish?

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Jesus tells us in our gospel lesson today

that we are to not point out the speck in our neighbor's eye
without taking the log out of our own.

Often we have interpreted this as not to judge others before judging ourselves,
which is certainly supported in Christ's words in Matthew 7,
“to judge not lest ye be judged also.”

And certainly that is part of it, but I think it's important
not to separate this from the preceding verses.

Jesus starts this section by asking,

“Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?”

Jesus is asking us to take a serious look at ourselves,
not just our faults, but our strengths as well.

As disciples of the living Christ, we are to be teachers and examples to others,
as he says in verse 40, “a disciple is not above the teacher,
but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.”

So we are called to be leaders, teachers, and examples for others,
yet not to go into that endeavor blind, but with open eyes.

What does that look like?

Well, it starts with getting rid of those blemishes we find in ourselves,
those logs in our own eyes.

What is it that distracts us from having our focus on God and Christ?

We often look at this scripture as a criticism of our own personal morality,
that we need to get rid of our own sin before working with others,
but I would argue it’s more about getting rid of those obstacles in your life
that pull you away from God and godly behavior.

After all, if we wait until we rid ourselves of sin and lead a perfect moral life,
we’ll never be rid of what blocks our vision.

Henry David Thoreau saw this irony of the blind leading the blind
in how we act and live and said of the New Testament
that people “favor it outwardly...defend it with bigotry...
and (yet) I know of no book that has so few readers.”

The truth is that reading texts like this can cause us discomfort.

It's easy for us to hear this text and think that it is meant for others not us.

We don't judge others, it must be for somebody else.

We admit we are sinners so, boom, our work here is done.

We know we sin and that shouldn't judge so case closed.

Not so quick. Jesus is talking about both “them” and “us.”

Jesus says to all of his followers, then and now, three things.

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First, it is hard to lead if you have no vision for where you are going.

Second, you cannot teach unless you have already learned.

Third, you are what you do, no matter what you believe.

Jesus thinking that the blind leading the blind is a recipe for disaster makes sense.

Jesus understood that it is impossible for us to teach and lead

if we ourselves lack vision, if we still have the plank in our own eye.

Sadly, too often we pick our leaders in the church

because they are available and willing,

not necessarily for their vision and ability.

Jesus also knew that teaching is hard work,

Little wonder he admonishes his followers not to try

until they have learned their own lessons.

He doesn't seem familiar with the expression that "those who cannot do, teach."

What he was aware of

was that most groups tend to look like their leaders

and, more importantly, act like their leaders.

In other words, before anyone attempts to teach or lead another,

some self-evaluation is in order.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells the story of how philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein

once said that his aim in philosophy was to show the fly how to get out of the bottle

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. When a fly becomes trapped in a bottle, it searches for a way out

but repeatedly bangs its head against the sides until it dies of exhaustion.

Had the fly the ability to reason, to learn, it could save itself fear, despair, and death
by reasoning that if there was a way in, there is a way out.

The fly cannot reason that it should look up.

To learn, to have insight, is to see familiar things from an unfamiliar perspective.

It is difficult for any of us to see ourselves in any other way
than from our own perspectives.

If we remove that log, however, we may be surprised with what we learn and therefore
can teach.

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Finally, Jesus uses two metaphors to teach one lesson.

Bad trees will not bear good fruit and bad foundations are not good support.

In other words, because we are intended to be a new creation,
transformed by grace, what we become in the process matters.

What are we do, what we practice.

Living a Christian life is by definition a life of learning, of acting.

It's a life of discernment, of seeking and following vision and call.

As most of you know,

I have been attending the district gathering in Lacey the last several days.

A big part of the discussion there has not only been a new way of thinking about God,

but also trying to envision a new way of thinking

about not only our district community,

but also how we as individual churches see ourselves.

When we look around, do we like what we see?

I've heard from some of you that you are concerned

about the size of the crowd on Sunday morning.

The question is, what do you see us becoming, what vision do you have for us?

Do you only want to see the perfect unblemished fruit,

that full sanctuary of decades in the past?

And if that fruit is unrealistic, do we give up the harvest and walk away

or do we seek what fruit we can find in this season?

That's the choice we have and it's a choice all congregations are facing.

Are we going to choose vitalization, revitalization, or hospice for ourselves?

Do we have the initiative to seek what new things God has for us

or do we want to simply do what we've always done and hope for a different result,

or just give up on God at work among us and walk away?

What is it you are willing to do?

Because Jesus is clear in our scripture this morning

that activity and participation are required.

As we journey together over the next month or so as we enter and travel through Lent together,

let us all give thought to what we envision for this church,

to what we are willing to contribute to move this church into a new phase of life,

in time, talent, or treasure,

or whether we want to simply move into hospice care.

I'm happy to lead us in whatever direction we choose,

but it needs to be an effort supported by all and utilizing the talents of all.

We are what we do, no matter what we believe.