

Bear Good Fruit, But Not in Plastic

Last week, Jesus referred to himself as the good shepherd in an argument with the Pharisees about caring for the people. This morning, at dinner with his disciples on the eve of his Passion, Jesus likens himself not to a shepherd, but to a grapevine. He explains that his friends are the branches, and the Father is the gardener who prunes the vine. He urges them to abide in his love so that they will bear much good fruit. He also observes that those who fail to abide in him will become like withered branches that are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Jesus the fruitful vine is almost as popular as Jesus the good shepherd, especially with preachers who try to bring people to God with threats of hellfire and damnation. Some liken the fire Jesus mentions here to the fires of hell, presenting this passage as a none-too-subtle threat from our Lord that, unless he sees us producing a whole lot of good fruit, we're going to be cut loose from the family of Christ and cast into eternal flames. That, I think, is a problem.

Jesus used farming analogies because he and his followers lived in an agrarian culture. Israel had its artisans, aristocrats, and religious leaders, but most of the people made their living off the land and water. They farmed, herded, and fished, and nearly everything they produced was biodegradable. Modern archeologists might be happier if Jesus's contemporaries had left behind more artifacts, especially if they contained clear, indisputable references to his life and ministry. Bible scholars might be less pleased – I sometimes think theologians live to argue – but there's no denying that the objects and manuscripts we have from Jesus's time are scant and subject to varying interpretations. It would be nice if our Lord had seen fit to leave us with a little more hard physical evidence of exactly how his earthly life unfolded.

Future archeologists won't have these complaints about us. If anything, they'll grumble about the difficulty of finding anything of value amid the trash we're leaving behind. Although

the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century brought many blessings, it also fundamentally changed our ideas about the earth, and not for the better. In a 1918 lecture, German sociologist Max Weber famously referred to the “disenchantment of the world” that resulted when Enlightenment thinking, modern scientific methods and the industrial age’s focus on productivity and profit stripped the natural world of its perceived magic. Suddenly, the Earth was no longer revered as God’s holy Creation. Instead, our world came to be seen as a pile of inanimate resources to be exploited for their commercial value. Virtue was no longer about producing good fruit; it was about mass producing consumer goods to feed the desires of the paying public. Everything had to be made and transported cheaply. Packaging had to be sturdy, lightweight, and inexpensive. That’s how we got to the point where, in the 1967 movie *The Graduate*, actor William Daniels dispensed this pithy bit of advice to a young Dustin Hoffman: “I have one word for you, my boy: *plastics*.”

The first synthetic plastic was created in 1855 by Alexander Parkes. His cellulose based “Parkesine” evolved into hundreds of varieties of plastic to serve thousands of uses, everything from fabric to machine parts to medical devices. Mass production of plastic didn’t really start until the 1940s; then, it exploded. Plastic is versatile, useful, and incredibly durable. The United Nations reports in its online exhibit, “Plastic is Forever,” that plastic “can take anywhere from 20 to 500 years to decompose and even then, it never fully disappears. It just gets smaller and smaller.” The U.N. estimates that 8.3 billion tons of plastic have been produced since the substance was invented, half of it in the last thirteen years. Much of it was specifically manufactured to be used once and thrown away, all in the name of convenience. Some plastic gets recycled, and a lot of it ends up in landfills. But, as CNN reported this past week, humanity dumps two thousand truckloads of plastic into the ocean *every day*. That’s 730,000 truckloads of

an indestructible substance being added to existing pollution in our water, and our bodies, every year. We don't see or taste it, but the U.N. reports that each of us ingests a credit card's worth of plastic every week. That can't be what God intended for us.

You may wonder how all of this relates to our Scripture readings. This being the weekend when we invited our neighbors to celebrate Earth Day and the arts with us, it's a good time to examine what humanity is doing to our fragile island home. It's also a time to consider what Jesus meant when he said we should produce "good fruit." Despite our postmodern propensity to think that "producing" means *making* something, Jesus wasn't talking about manufacturing plastic bottles of grape juice or frozen strawberries in single-use plastic bags. I believe he was discussing the intangible, and definitely noncommercial, fruits of the Spirit that Paul described in his letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we cultivate those qualities in ourselves, self-control in particular, it quickly becomes clear that we need to rethink how we care for God's Creation, especially if we want to love one another as John's letter urges us to do. It's not loving to leave a toxic mess for our children and grandchildren. It's not loving to turn God's masterpiece into a garbage dump. And it's not loving for wealthy, industrialized nations to dump our garbage on our less prosperous neighbors. For Earth Day, CNN ran pictures of fisherfolk who live in Java, Indonesia, where once-beautiful beaches are now buried in plastic waste. The Javanese used to catch fish in their nets. Now, they pull up nets filled with plastic and hunt for a few fish amid all the trash.

It's an ongoing frustration for preachers who care about the environment that Jesus never told his disciples not to pollute. He didn't have to – the pollutants that desecrate Creation today were unimaginable two thousand years ago. His followers had enough trouble understanding Jesus when he used agricultural metaphors. They would have been completely flummoxed if he

had warned them not to throw single-use plastic in the ocean. It might have been nice if he'd said something to warn us but, frankly, I wonder how well we would have listened. We moderns love the conveniences of our hyper-industrial age, maybe more than we love our Creator. It's not as though we need to be told not to destroy the world around us. After two thousand years of living with Jesus's words, we really should be able to figure that one out for ourselves.

Plastic is a problem ... and there's reason for hope. As John reminds us, God is love, and all love comes from God. As Jesus assures us, if we abide in him, our loving God will do for us whatever we ask. We shouldn't expect God to make our plastic rubbish miraculously disappear, but we can ask him to show us what needs to be done and to give us the determination to do it. We can ask him to help us abide in Jesus's love and make love the bedrock of our care for Creation. We're already doing it – CNN reported just yesterday that we're starting to see progress in our efforts to reduce fossil fuel emissions, and we can make progress around plastic waste as well. No one person created our plastic mess alone, and we're only going to get out of it if we work together and with God's help. We'll need to make significant changes in how we live and what we value. We'll need to love Creation more than we love the economic benefits and immediate convenience that plastic provides. And we'll need to get moving – every day that two thousand truckloads of plastic are dumped in the ocean makes the situation that much worse. With love for God and one another, though, I sincerely believe we can solve this.

Dr. Seuss closed his environmental masterwork, *The Lorax*, with these words: “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.” He had a valid if gloomy point, but he may not have considered how faith and divine support might guide our efforts. So let me close with this rejoinder to the good doctor: loving God and Creation with all of our hearts, we *can* make things better if we each do our parts. Amen.