

On Being Saved and Bearing Fruit

Co-missioners,

Two weeks ago Steve Kuhl sent us a reflection he wrote for his parishioners at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in South Milwaukee. It deals with St. John's vine-and-branches text for this year's Fifth Sunday of Easter. Yes, that day is already behind us. Not so the days of absorbing the text and putting it to use.

Trust deeply. Bear richly. God grant what Christ has promised!

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Saved to Bear Fruit A Reflection on John 15:1-11

by Steven C. Kuhl



In the Gospel text for this Fifth Sunday of Easter (John 15:1-11) Jesus uses an ancient, horticultural image to describe the relationship between him and his disciples. It is encapsulated in this declaration: "I am the vine, you are branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5).

That image, and the meaning Jesus wants us to take from it, summarizes the whole of the Christian faith. Just as a branch is fruitless and useless without being attached to the vine whose sap is the source of its life and fruit, so we as disciples are fruitless and useless without being attached to Jesus whose word with the Holy Spirit is the source of our life and fruit.

John's Jesus is using this image to say what Paul says in a propositional way in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the

gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Here are some things these texts push us to grasp and understand:

First, our salvation is, first and last, a gift. That is what it means when it says we are "saved by grace." Grace means that salvation is not something we have accomplished, but something that God has accomplished for us and gives to us through Jesus Christ. It is "gift of God." And, of course, that gift includes not only the promise of forgiveness, but the promise of eternal life.



Second, “eternal life” means life with God, with the divine, with the "eternal." In the text for this Sunday, it is a relational reality. For example, if I would ask you to tell me about your "life," you wouldn't just say that "I breathe." You would tell me about what and who all are *in* your life. You would tell me about where you live, who you live with, and what kind of life you have there and with them. Is it burdensome, joyful, conflicted, congenial? That's what the Bible means by life in all its fullness or abundance. In essence, you would talk about what Paul calls "your way of life."

Third, as Paul says, the "way of life" God has given us is a life of "good works." That is what eternal life is for: doing good, as God does good. And John's favorite way of describing "doing good" is love. Eternal life, therefore, means that the

love the Father and Son share with each other is same kind of love that Jesus and his disciples share with each other, which is same kind of love Jesus' disciples share with each other. Eternal life is a life lived in "mutual love" that has its source in the Father and Son, who are (the definition of) love itself, that then flows from Jesus to us and from there to one another.

Fourth, in the upper room Jesus called this "way of life" his "new commandment." He described it like this: "Love one another as I have loved you." Our ability to love in this godly way, in the way the Father and Son love each other, is itself part and parcel of the "life," of the salvation, of the way of life he gives us. Only as we abide in Jesus and he in us is it possible for us to love one another as he and the Father love each other. That's why Jesus says, "apart from me you can do nothing." For just as a branch separated from the vine can bear no fruit, so a disciple who does not abide in Jesus' love (lacks true faith) cannot keep his commandments.

Fifth, "keeping Jesus' commandments" therefore means "loving one another." And we love one another, as Paul puts it, by "doing the good works that God has prepared as our way of life." Significantly, the word "commandments" does not mean, here, "laws to be obeyed." Rather, it means specific or "concrete acts of love" that are determined by the needs of those whom we encounter in daily life. Out of those encounters come the commandments, the concrete opportunity to love. They are described as "good works that God has prepared as our way of life" because we don't necessarily know what good works God might give us to do next year, next month, or even next day. They simply come to us spontaneously and are by faith received as Jesus' love commandments.



In the course of my ministry, when people would ask me, "What's on your schedule for today?" I would, with not a little tongue in cheek, answer "interruptions." Of course, I always had scheduled things to do. And they certainly are to be seen as "good works prepared

beforehand by God." After all, how else would they have gotten on my scheduled? The fact that I have lead-time for dealing with them in no way takes away their character as "good works prepared beforehand by God." But this fact is also true. Spontaneous things also inevitably pop up as I go through my days and remind me that it is indeed God who prepares "good works" for me to do and that this is simply my "way of life."

But one more thing needs to be said. Our "way of life," aka, those "love commandments" Jesus sets before us day by day are not always and simply "spontaneous." Most of them emerge out of a bundle of enduring relationships that God has placed me in called "vocations." That word literally means "callings": as in being called to do something for someone with whom I have an enduring relationship. Those enduring relationships that make up my life and out of which come the good works I'm called to do include being a spouse, a parent, a son or daughter, a sister or brother, a worker, a citizen, a neighbor, a member of a church, etc. You get the idea. Through these enduring relationship God prepares the "good works" or the "love commandments" that form my way of life.

But the main point is this: We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ to do good works. The relationship of salvation and good works is one directional. Salvation makes good works possible; good works do *not* make salvation possible.

Nevertheless, salvation and good works are intimately related in

that good works are the way of life for those whom God has saved, for those who put their trust in him. By them the love with which Christ as loved us becomes the love by which we love one another. By them God is glorified, the Son is delighted, and our joy is complete—and in a way for all to see.