

Sermon Title: **“Bearing Fruit”**

Bible: **Philippians 3:12-14 & Matthew 21:33-46**

When: on Sunday, October 8, 2023

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew is about the parable of the wicked tenants. Who were the wicked tenants? The religious leaders at that time. After hearing this parable, the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that Jesus was speaking about them; they did not like this parable, and wanted to arrest Jesus. The term landowner can mean God. God had a vineyard, which can symbolize the people of Israel. The vineyard– God’s people–were taken care of by the tenants, or, in other words, the religious leaders. At harvest time, God sent his slaves, which can symbolize the prophets. However, the religious leaders did not welcome them and rejected the prophets. God sent more slaves, more prophets. But it did not work. Finally, God sent his son, Jesus. However, the tenants–the religious leaders–rejected the landowner’s son, Jesus, and crucified him. That’s why the chief priests and the Pharisees were angered by this parable. Does this interpretation make sense to you?

How about the last part of the parable? When the landowner comes, the landowner will take the vineyard from the wicked tenants and will lease it to other tenants, which can symbolize Christ-believers. But there is one condition: to those tenants who produce its fruits, the vineyard will be given. Does this parable still make sense to you? If this parable still makes sense to you, how about us? Can we receive the vineyard? Do we bear fruits? Are we fruitful?

2. The Book “Bearing Fruit”

Recently I have been reading some books about Stewardship, because our church plans to have our Stewardship Campaign for 2024. One of the books is called “Bearing Fruit: Ministry with Real Results” by Lovett H. Weems Jr. and Tom Berlin. Lovett H Weems Jr. is a professor at Wesley Theological Seminary who is an expert on church leadership. Tom Berlin was a UMC pastor, and was elected as a bishop last year. Actually this book is not directly related to Stewardship, but it gave me many thoughts and challenges about fruitfulness. So, I would like to share some of my thoughts and challenges from the book, because the vineyard will be given to those tenants who produce fruit. Do we want to bear fruit? Then, do we bear fruit? What do we do to bear fruit? And how do we define the fruit?

When you hear about fruitfulness, what comes to your mind? From the book, I share some responses about or against fruitfulness.

The first response is “We are called to be faithful, not to be fruitful or effective.” This could be a good excuse for the time of the membership decline, as our denomination has shrunk

since 1966. So, the numbers are not important in this response. Is it okay to only be faithful, and not to be fruitful? Then, pastors and lay leaders do not have any responsibility for fruitfulness? Faithful ministry is not fruitful? How about fruitful ministry? Fruitful ministry is not faithful?

Another response could be “We are called to a ‘ministry of presence.’” I know the power of presence. But in this response, pastors are tempted to become chaplains. The Chaplain’s goal is simply to be with people. So, there is no need to discover a vision and to set up plans, no need to spend time and energy to make disciples for the transformation of the world.

The third response could be “We need to understand where we are in our life cycle as a congregation.” Our church is 170 years old. And we are old and we are getting older day by day. But does it mean that we are too old to do any fruitful ministry? Do we have any faith or hope for God to use us in order to make something new?

What do we hope for? Don’t we hope to be both faithful and fruitful? Don’t we hope to be with people and to be with more people? Don’t we hope to continue our church’s legacy, as we have done for the past 170 years?

The authors also distinguished fruitfulness from success. Success might be for personal advancement or acclaim. But fruitfulness is for the advancement of God’s reign on earth. When you watch the NBA, there are some basketball players who are great individually, but are not that great as a team. Which is more important to be a successful player or to win the game as a team? The best one is to do both. But which one comes first?

3. Our Mission

Does God want us to do every ministry? We are a small church which has a limited amount of time, energy, and resources. We cannot do everything. Even megachurches do not do every ministry. Because your pastor is Korean, does God want us to do Korean ministry? No. God uses other churches to do Korean ministry. But how about us? As a local church here and at this time, what does God want us to do? To be fruitful, we need to discern what God wants us to do. We need to discern what fruit or outcome we hope for. When you plant a lemon tree, do you expect to get apples? No, we expect lemons when we plant a lemon tree. And to bear bigger lemons, we need to prune. We need to prioritize, select and focus. Sometimes, this can mean giving up something while trusting God and other churches to fill the gap, or it can mean to stop doing something without compressing our mission.

What is our mission of the United Methodist Church? To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To achieve this mission, what vision do you have? I know that you have many good ideas. But what vision does God want us to have? As a pastor, one of my visions or priorities is to reach out to new people. To celebrate our 170th anniversary, to give Hispanic Scholarships, to greet others in front of the church on Sundays, to have the blessing of the animals, and to do the church Trunk or Treat are for reaching out to new people. When new people need a faith community, I would like to let them know that we, our church, are here for them. Do you agree with my vision? Perhaps my vision is just a small part of cultivating the soil until we bear fruits. But my hope is not only to be faithful, but also

to be fruitful. Some plant the seeds, some water them, and God will make them grow, and someday some will do the harvesting. I just do what I am called to do.

4. Paul's Attitude in Prison

As I shared before, the number of people in our denomination has decreased since 1966. After COVID-19, more churches are struggling in many ways. Our church is not an exception. And I look at the Apostle Paul in prison. What he focused on was not his situation, not what he achieved before, but the goal that lies ahead. So, I try to focus on what mission we have, what vision I have, what I can do now for our church. And I would like to close with the poetry of Marge Piercy which is on the last page of the book "Bearing Fruit."

Every gardener knows that
after the digging,
after the planting,
after the long season of tending and growth,
the harvest comes.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, thank you so much for calling us as your tenants. You gave us the vineyard. You called us church and you called us to take care of this church and this community. When we dig, when we plant, when we water, when we tend, please be with us in your grace and love in order to bear the fruits. In Jesus' name. Amen.