



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Eighth Sunday After Trinity, July 21st, 2013

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:
"Ye shall know them by their fruits." St. Matt. 7:16

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Some of you might know that Carolyn and I have had the pleasure over the years of being involved in telemedicine. What telemedicine is that from the physician's side, you get the diagnostic imagery and diagnostic information in a real-time basis with the **doctor**, while on the patient's side, the doctor has the visual presence and ability to talk with the patients and interact with them no matter how far away they are.

Of all the different applications we've done, and we've done this all over the world, the one that always awed and humbled me the most was an application that we did with a doctor, an ob/gyn, down in Slidell, Louisiana, just north of New Orleans. Doctor Collins was a specialist in umbilical cord distress, and he would send his midwives out into the bayous, in places where there wasn't transportation back and forth. When the midwives found one of these babies that looked like they were in danger of having fetal cord distress, they would hook the patient up to the monitor, and we would have our videoconference with the doctor and midwife at the site where the mother was, in the middle of the swamps. Doctor Collins would then direct those midwives in actually spinning the baby in utero and unwrapping the cord so that the baby could be delivered the way it was intended, safely, and into a new life. That was incredibly beautiful and incredibly humbling.

I bring that up because I want to have that imagery to talk about these "fruits" because while it's true that the fruits that Jesus was talking about are images that would appeal to an agrarian culture -- at the time Israel had an agrarian economy -- what He's really talking about is life itself. The fruit of God is life, and the fruit that is corrupted is death. The trees that we are discussing are the archetypal trees, that not only extend through the Bible and history, but actually beyond history, both before history and after history.

In the Garden of Eden there are two notable trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they come, by temptation, into this understanding of self -- of their own identity and their own will. In the womb, of course, the baby has to have a sense of self. He still is dependent on his mother, he is still connected to the mother's nourishment, oxygen, and very life itself through that umbilical cord to its mother, and yet it has to know it is separate, that it has identity. That's really important because in God's love for us, we have to know that we are persons that can receive God's love, that we are unique, and that He has a special purpose and intention for every one of us. So the natural expression of the knowledge of the tree of good and evil is that

sense of self within the context of doing God's will.

The temptation was that Adam and Eve turned, rotated, disoriented themselves from their sense of self as subservient to God's will to being subservient to their own will, to their own selfish desires, to depending on themselves. What comes of that? They felt shameful immediately and covered themselves with clothes. They are separated from God, they are separated from each other, and they are ultimately introduced into the world of corruption and their peril, just like a baby who begins to rotate in the womb the wrong way, gets that cord wrapped, and begins to be in distress.

In the womb, as the baby grows in itself and in its place, it fills its environment and presses harder and harder on the umbilical cord until finally it stands a chance of choking itself and actually not surviving. Spiritually we do the same thing. We become so filled with our self, with our selfishness, with our selfish desire, that we begin to choke and realize we can't survive on our own and of our own abilities, of our own spirituality without God's love. We faint, we get weak, we get anxious, we become terrified, we become violent in trying to keep ourselves alive, doing harm to others, instead of doing good to others.

The tree of life reappears in the Gospel at the center of history. The center of history is the Cross, and the Cross is the tree of life, from the Garden of Eden replanted in history and time, and Jesus, on that cross, gives us by his sacrifice via the resurrection, the ability to have grace of the Holy Spirit again, to have God's love and life flow back into our lives. Just like Dr. Collins directing the midwife, to spin that baby in the womb so that relief is off the pressure on the umbilical cord and the life of the placenta can begin to flow in it, so God directs us, the midwives, which is His Church -- which is our worship and our sacraments and our life together -- we're the ones that get to rotate ourselves and those we love and those we are given, so that we can reopen the channel of grace from the Holy Spirit.

At the end of history, after Jesus comes the second time in all His power and all His glory, when the sheep and the goats are separated and the saved are brought to the City of God, the tree of life appears again in the center. But the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil is gone. Just like a baby is born and now is fully developed and fully capable of living on its own, so spiritually we will be as we go through the end of our personal world and the end of the world and go into the life that we were being prepared for in this world. Like the baby being prepared for life outside the womb in its mother's arms, we're being prepared for life in God's house. When we come to that place, we won't have to worry about ourselves. We'll be able to feel the love of God, the light of God, and the life of God, and we will be fed by that directly, the same as the baby that's born feels the love of its mother, in the arms of its mother, in the light of the world that shines around it.

So what do all these images have to do with our lives? Well, as I said, the Church is the midwife. We are the ones who are meant to be in the world, finding those who are in distress, helping them to rotate away from their self-dependence and their selfishness, back into the world where they can begin to receive Grace, where they can begin to receive the Holy Spirit, where they can begin to receive life. That's our ministry. And usually that ministry happens close to home. We don't have to go very far. We don't have to go to Africa or Asia or Indonesia to find the people that need us as midwives. They're right in our hearts. They're in our homes. They surround us as neighbors and friends, they surround us as people who are right here in our neighborhoods. So as we leave the church today, our challenge is to be good midwives, to live the kinds of lives that reflect and radiate God's grace -- courage in the face of death, the comfort and confidence that no matter what travails we have in this world, they will not hurt us. They will only bring us to our intended place, which is life with God forever. And above all, to be filled with the love for each other that reflects the love that God has for us. And that will be our jobs: go forth, be good midwives, radiate God's love, make His presence known in the world, and bring those people you love with you, opening up the path to grace, and having them with us when we emerge at the far end of our second birth into eternal life and love.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

