



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday August 10, 2014 - Trinity 8

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

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“Ye shall know them by their fruits.” St.
Matt. 7:16

A good tree brings forth good fruit. A corrupt tree brings forth bad fruit. By nature, either tree is capable of bearing good fruit. However, the capacity to bear good fruits in some trees can be corrupted, and a tree that bears evil fruit will be cut down and burned in the fire. Simple statements. Powerful images. Easy to visualize.

The imagery is not just symbolic. In the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, there are two trees, the Tree of life and the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil. The Tree of knowledge is the one that is corrupted by the serpent. He enticed Eve and Adam by appealing to their pride, ambition and selfishness. The fruit that is borne of the tree is truly evil. It is the fruit of exile from God, shame, sin and death. By their fruits shall you know them. The shame that Adam and Eve felt at being naked, the need to hide from God, and the need to blame each other for their own sins are all the fruit of that corrupt tree. God knew before they ever admitted their sins that they had eaten the forbidden fruit. By their fruit they were known.

The Tree of life re-appears in the Center of History, the pivotal point of time when mankind is redeemed from their own fruits of corruption and made new by their engrafting into the tree of Life. Of course, the tree of Life is the Cross. The fruit of that Tree is the sacrifice offered by Jesus on our behalf. It was a sacrifice of love, of humility and of obedience. The seed that was taken from that Tree and buried sprung forth in Resurrected perfection. The wounds of sacrifice became the signs of glory. By the fruit of that Tree, we know God's love for us, the redeeming grace of Jesus and eternal life by the Holy Ghost. By baptism, we are engrafted into that Tree, and we can bear good fruit by the grace of God.

There is no alternative. At the end of the world as revealed in the Revelation of St. John, there is only one Tree. The Tree of Life, bearing 12 fruits, (for each of the Tribes of Israel and each of the Apostles) stands alone at the Center of the City of God. The Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil is cut down and has been cast into the flame at the defeat of sin and death and the devil. All the fruit of that tree is cast into the fiery pit with the branches. In the end, we will be fruit of the Tree of Life, or we will not be, at least not be in the City of God.

So, today, in this time, what does it mean to be a fruit of the Tree of Life? How is it that we are known as the fruit of the sacrifice that was offered on that Cross? It is an important question, and has

been at the heart of much discord and debate within the Church.

Martin Luther nearly despaired in his search for how he could become fruit of the Tree of Life. Though the Spirit was willing, he found that his flesh was weak, and he despaired of being worthy to be in the presence of a loving Creator because he could not separate from his sinful life completely. The solution, as he worked it out, led to the most devastating schism in the history of the Church. Because He could not be saved by his actions, Luther had the epiphany that we are saved by faith alone. That it is the faith that we are in Christ that identifies us as fruit of the Cross.

The Roman tradition, contradicted Luther's interpretation. Faith alone can't possibly save. After all, they would point out, look at the demons that Jesus cast out. They knew Him for who He truly was. They confessed His Name, but they did not convert, they did not repent, and they were not saved.

Instead of seeing the common truth they both expressed, they, Rome and the followers of Luther, excommunicated each other, stopped listening, set their hearts coldly against each other by pride, and consequently set about murdering each other and waging war against Christian brothers in the name of Christ's religion. The seeds of the Cross were corrupted by this debate and have bore evil fruit that confuse and frustrate Christians to this very day.

The truth is quite simple, and requires no posturing, no taking sides, no hatred, murder or presumption. We can't possibly be saved by our actions. We can only be saved by having faith that our character is changed, and that we are made heirs of salvation by being made fruit of the Tree of Life. But, faith is not an intellectual expression. Those demons did not have faith. Faith is knowledge that is manifest by the fervent desire to change, to be obedient, to please our Father, to love God with our heart and souls and minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Faith necessitates action. Faith is known by deed. We are known not by the potential

of the seed in us, but by the fruit of that seed as it matures. Faith is good works offered up to God, not for salvation, but for thanksgiving for our salvation.

Fruit is not institutional, it is personal, specifically, it is personal holiness. Holiness does not mean perfect, holiness means setting aside for the purpose of God. Jesus didn't say that we would be known as His fruit by great theological works, mighty cathedrals, great artwork, or even this beautiful liturgy. He told us that we would be known to the world by the way we lived, how we loved each other, how we even reached out to love those who would hurt us. The world knows who we are as Christians by what we do. Simple.

"Do as I say and not as I do" never cuts it. We can sense hypocrisy more keenly than anything else we face in the world. What we say only has impact by the way that we back it up with our lives. Every day, we have to strive for personal holiness, to more perfectly live a life that expresses the love of Christ today than it did yesterday. We don't have to be perfect, in fact, perfection will come only after death, when our bodies are resurrected. But, we do have to be holy.

Every day, people spy on us. They watch us out of the corner of their eyes. They measure and judge us. They look to see if our deeds live up to our proclamation as Christians. Sometimes, the spies are persecutors, but most often, they are people searching for what we have been freely given. They watch us to see if we really do know the secret, do understand the purpose of this life, with its sadness and suffering and evil, looking to see how we live and how we die. Looking at us and judging whether we are good fruit or corrupt fruit, judging our entire tree by the taste of their experience with us. By our fruit are we known. Let us pray to be good fruit, the good fruit of the Tree of Life, our Savior Jesus Christ.

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