

A Labor Of Love

Today's Scripture lessons deal with a subject that tends to make us Lutherans uncomfortable: the subject is good works, or "bearing fruit for the Lord."

We're right at home when we talk about grace and faith, but when the subject of good works comes up, we start to get indigestion.

"Good works—eewww—isn't that a Catholic thing?"

Well, both the Old Testament lesson AND the Gospel lesson for today speak of the importance of putting our faith into action by doing good works.

God made it clear to the Pharisees that if they failed to do this, he would take away their inheritance and give it to someone else.

In the Scripture readings for today, Jesus gives us the Law (what happens if we don't bear fruit), Isaiah gives us the Gospel (how God's love makes us fruitful), and Paul gives us the application (how we can manage our attitudes so that we WANT to produce fruit for the Kingdom).

Let's start with the Law.

The parable of the tenants of the vineyard issues a fearful warning to Christians who discount or ignore the importance of putting their faith into action.

It's as simple as this: lazy Christians risk losing their seat on the glory train.

They live under the illusion that there will never be a day of reckoning for their refusal to love and forgive each other as Christ loved and forgave them.

What do we have in this parable?

A man plants a vineyard and then does all he can to insure that it will be productive.

He builds a wall to protect it, he digs a winepress for making wine, and then he builds a watchtower so that its tenants can watch for any enemies that come their way.

Then he leases the vineyard out to some tenants and goes away.

When the harvest is ready, he sends his servants to collect what they owe him.

But the tenants reject his servants and drive them off, one after another.

Finally he sends his son, hoping that they will recognize him and respect him.

But when the tenants see the son coming, they decide to make the vineyard their own, so they seize him and throw him out of the vineyard and kill him.

Now the terms of the parable are clear; the vineyard represents the land of Israel, the tenants represent God's chosen people, the Israelites, and the servants the owner sends represent the prophets God had sent to remind his people what he required of them.

Having been blessed, they should be a blessing to others.

Having received mercy from Him they should show mercy to one another.

Having been redeemed by a just and righteous God, they should practice justice and righteousness toward others.

Having received light from God, they should serve as a light to other nations.

Most important of all, having been forgiven their sins, they should forgive each other's sins.

But like the tenants of the vineyard, the people of Israel had rejected the prophets God sent to guide and warn them.

Some they persecuted, some they imprisoned, some they killed.

And now God has sent his own Son, hoping that they will recognize him and respect him and listen to him.

But the Israelites' hearts have grown hard; all they see in God's Son is a threat to their autonomy.

And so, says Jesus, like the tenants of the vineyard they will throw him out of the vineyard and kill him.

And so it was: within a few days, the Jewish leaders would hand Jesus over to the Romans who took him outside the city walls and crucified him.

Then Jesus puts the question to them: *“When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”*

The Jewish leaders knew, of course, that Jesus was speaking about them, for even as he was speaking they were plotting his arrest and murder.

Nevertheless, they are forced to answer prophetically: *“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,”* they reply, *“and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”*

And Jesus responds, *“Therefore I tell you that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”*

Only people who produce fruit will be allowed to continue as tenants of the vineyard!

This should be a sobering message to us all.

We grace-loving Lutheran tenants—have a tendency to think that since we have received the kingdom freely, we can remain in it freely *without producing fruit for the owner.*

But Jesus says to us as he said to the Jews of his time: ‘Huh-uh.’

We are assigned to be laborers in God’s vineyard—not just occupants.

And the job of laborers is to labor.

Otherwise we run the same risk as the Jews of Jesus’ time: *“...the kingdom will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”*

It’s a little jarring to hear, isn’t it?

But, you reply, grace is not grace unless it’s grace.

Are you now telling me that I have to pay a price for my salvation?

Is it faith PLUS works after all?

No.

We are saved by God's grace which we freely receive through faith.

God created his vineyard and put us in it without any help from us.

But He didn't save us merely so that we could bask in our salvation; he saved us so that we could be the means through which His salvation would reach other people.

And other people can't come to know the grace that saved us unless they see evidence of it in our words and our actions.

Jesus' final and greatest command to His people is, *"Love one another as I have loved you."*

And Jesus didn't love us merely by feeling affection for us, he loved us by giving up everything He had so that WE could have a relationship with the Father.

He set us an example and he commanded us to imitate it.

We ignore Him at our own peril.

So much for Law; how about the Gospel?

Isaiah shows us God's heart of love that moved Him to place us in his vineyard.

He uses the language of lovers to speak about our relationship with God: God is "my loved one" and "the one I love" and his people are "the garden of his delight."

He has placed his vineyard on "a fertile hillside" and "planted it with the choicest of vines."

Now this is imagery which is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, of man walking hand in hand with a loving God in paradise.

And I think the similarity is intended.

In His plan of redemption, God has created a new Garden of Eden for his chosen people and he has placed them in it just like he placed Adam and Eve in the original garden: *"to work it and take care of it."*

And the work he has placed them there to do is joyful work, work which unlike all the other work we do in this world, doesn't lie under a curse.

This is the work of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, of loving your neighbor as yourself, of being a blessing to others just as God has been a blessing to you.

This world has no claim on that kind of work.

The work of loving others as we have been loved by Jesus is a kind of work that brings joy to the giver as well the receiver.

Paul says this kind of work was, *"...prepared by God in advance for us to do."*

In doing it we *"lay hold of heaven itself."*

Luther put it this way: *"Let us walk among our good deeds as in a paradise of God."*

What a beautiful picture!

But something gets in the way, doesn't it?

Why don't we feel delighted about doing the joyous work to which God has called us?

Why doesn't forgiveness come easily?

Why does serving my neighbor in love seem like an imposition rather than a joy?

Why does my desire for revenge trump my willingness to forgive?

Why does wickedness appeal to me more than righteousness at times?

Well, it's the sin nature that we all carry around with us that interposes itself between me and my neighbor.

It's the spirit of Mammon, the god of this world, who demands and gets a lion's share of my worship.

It's what Paul calls "...*the evil that is always right there with me,*" even when I try to do good.

It's the insatiable monster of Vanity that takes pride in the good that I manage to do and demands credit for it, even though the good I do is God acting through me.

So, no, good works don't always come easily or naturally.

Usually we have to *will* ourselves to do them.

And so we come to Paul, who tells us very simply to **"Press on!"**
I learned two things about Queen Elizabeth this last week

The first was that she was a devout Christian.

The other was that she was tough minded.

When friends would complain to her that they were having a hard time dealing with some problem, she would say, "Just get on with it!"

Sounds a lot like, "Press on!"

Listen to how Paul describes his own struggle to do good works: "*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*"

Paul was just like you and me.

He's in the race but he hasn't reached the finish line.

He knows what he has to do, but he doesn't do it as well as he could.

His loyalties are divided between the glories of the Kingdom of Heaven and the constraints of this world.

Between the promptings of the Holy Spirit who indwells him and the demonic advice of his sin nature.

And so all he can do is press on as he strives to subdue his sin nature and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Like every Christian, he's at war with himself.

And as the battle rages, he continues to say: Press on!

And so should we say to ourselves every day of our Christian lives: Press on!

But as we press on, for strength and assurance let us keep in mind Paul's final words on the subject: *"Only let us live up to what we have already attained."*

Oh how I love these words!

The victor's crown for an Olympic runner is always in doubt until the final gun.

But the victor's crown for Paul and for you and for me, is never in doubt: we don't have to run the race with the fear that we may lose, because God has assured us of our victory!

We are not pressing on to win the victory, but so that we may live up to the victory God has already given us.

A Christian brother of mine once told me that for him, living the life of a Christian was all about learning how to "live in the Kingdom."

I can't think of a better way to describe Christian life.

It may not look like it, but Paradise Restored is waiting for us right outside our own front door every morning of our lives.

All we have to do is get up and go to work!

Amen.

