

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Sunday, April 29, 2018, Year A
Father Mike Holloran

“By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Three thoughts are expressed in this short saying of the Lord.

First, that God the Creator is glorified by our bearing fruit.

Second, that we bear fruit by being disciples of Jesus, staying attached to him like branches on the vine.

Third, the fruit itself-- what is it? Let's start with that.

Fruit here is not grapes or tomatoes or apples, but simply the end product of any process of growth, the process realized, the purpose fulfilled. That we are to bear fruit means that human life has a purpose, which we are meant to realize, or our life is a failure.

So, what is our human purpose? If you read a little further on from today's Gospel passage you find out. In verses that follow Jesus says, “This I command you: love one another.” (Jn. 15:17) and “I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete.” (Jn. 15:11)

We are made for joy, the joy that only love can give, love for God and for all His creation, including most especially our neighbor. The complete joy of infinite love is our purpose, what we are meant for, the fruit we are to produce, and failing to produce have failed of our purpose.

Thought #2-- we can bear fruit only by staying attached to Jesus, like branches on a life-giving vine. This is so because Jesus is the Word of God Who became a human being so that the infinite life he has from the Father can flow into us, empowering us to love as God loves. If we separate from Christ we cut off this flow of divine life and cannot fulfill our purpose. Instead we begin to wither and die, as surely as if we stopped eating food or breathing the air. To bear fruit we must stay attached to Christ.

And thought #1 – God is glorified by our sharing his joy forever because this accomplishes His purpose in creating us, it is the triumph of His grace that flows into us through Christ.

Now, how do these nice abstract thoughts show up in real life?

When Saul got back from his eventful trip to Damascus he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, and with reason: Saul had been persecuting them. But then Barnabas took a chance and reached out to him. Barnabas. His name means “Son of Encouragement”. A great name, and what every Christian is called to be-- an encourager reaching out to bring others into the community where they can attach more firmly to Christ and glorify God by bearing fruit. Barnabas had a knack for doing that, but he was only human, as was Saul. At one point they had a falling out, but by the grace of God they reconciled. We cannot love God and hate each other!

Let me now tell you a sad story about detaching from Christ and withering. It's a true story told by Dr. Edward Sri in a video series that you can watch on “Formed”. The series is called “Who Am I To Judge?”, and it's about the culture of relativism in which we all live. We all hear it-- “what's true for you isn't necessarily true for me.” Cara, not her real name, a practicing Catholic, was in her first year of college. In a casual conversation about a survey conducted by one of her professors, she mentioned to a class-

mate that she didn't think a man could marry another man. The classmate spread the word and at a party Cara got pounced on for being an intolerant Christian homophobe. Since we all have a natural need to be connected, the threat of ostracism is powerful indeed and Cara began to trim her rhetorical sails just a bit by adding "for me".

"I think gay marriage is wrong, for me, "I think sex outside of marriage is wrong, for me," "I think abortion is wrong, for me."

"For me" made her opinions just relative enough to make her tolerable at campus social events, but this slight verbal adjustment veiled a huge surrender, because if abortion is wrong "for me", then it might be right for you, and if it can be right for you then it might be right for me in the right circumstances. This is the end of objective moral truth, for example that abortion is always wrong for everyone because it is a violation of the justice we owe to a fellow human being.

With her surrender of objective moral truth Cara began to slip into the quicksands of relativism. By the end of her freshman year she was no longer attending Mass and, as Dr. Sri delicately puts it, "was doing things she never thought she would do."

On today's college campus we can guess what those things might be. We don't have to guess what those things do to a person's self-respect, sense of purpose, and their joy. For the sake of attaching herself to one community she detached herself from another, from the community that had been helping her stay attached to Christ. Like a branch cut off from the vine she began to wither.

I don't know what happened to Cara, but I've met enough people returning to Christ from a life of empty self-seeking to be hopeful. We are living in a culture of relativism, which breeds indifference, loneliness and despair. But the community of those attached to Christ knows what is going on and is reaching out. There are those excellent videos on "Formed" available to everyone 24/7. There's the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, the St. Paul Street Evangelization, and the National Evangelization Team. And each one of us can be Barnabas-- a son or daughter of encouragement-- finding joy in our own humble attachment to Christ and ready to help others reconnect to the life-giving vine.