

PRODUCE OR DIE
5th in a Series on “Spiritual Leadership”
Annual Congregational Meeting – January 23, 2011 – John 15: 1-11 The Church of the Covenant

An apricot tree in my backyard had two branches and the tree produced no fruit. It looked sickly and I really should remove the entire tree. So one spring I went out into my back yard and cut down the most sickly of the two and I said to the other one: “See, what happens when you don’t produce any fruit!” Would it shock you that the now invigorated remaining branch produced small apricots that year; small but incredibly sweet. Normally I don’t go around threatening trees, perhaps there is a spiritual metaphor for spiritual leadership. Spiritual leaders produce spiritual fruit for the Kingdom of God.

Out scripture from the Gospel of John are some of my favorites in all scripture. Jesus is “the true vine” (John 15: 1) and we are the branches attached to the true vine. Just as a plant gives vitality, water, feeding and sustenance through its attachment to the branches, so too does our attachment and connection to Jesus give us power and strength to produce fruit for the Kingdom. The Holy Spirit comes up from the Father, out into the true vine, Jesus, and then out into the branches, out into us. *“Apart from me you can do nothing”, says Jesus (John 15: 5)* Spiritual leaders detached from Jesus can do nothing and bear no fruit, even as a branch disconnected from its root will wither and die. God is the *“Vinedresser” (v. 1)* He is the one who tends to vine and the branches and ultimately produces the fruit. *“Abide in me, and I in you.”, says Jesus (v. 4)* When Jesus Christ lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling our heart then Jesus abides and lives in us; when we live for Him, when we choose to live our life and abide in Him, when we ask for the Spirit to do spiritual works through us, then we abide in Jesus and Jesus abides in us. This connectedness is the vital spiritual relationship between the vine-Jesus and the branches-us. But if we become disconnected from the vine, if we think we can do it on our own or if our spiritual life becomes dry and dusty and spirit-less, then as branches we are not connected to the source of our spiritual power and life, the Spirit does not course through us because we are not abiding in Him, and we wither and die and produce no spiritual fruit for His Kingdom. *“Every branch of mine”, says Jesus, “that bears no fruit, he takes away...” (John 15: 2)* Every gardener knows you cut down and prune the sickly branches, put them in a pile where cut off from the vine they wither and die, and then you put them in a compost heap, set them out for the garbage man, put them in a pile and burn them.

To summarize –it is the singular goal of the spiritual leader to produce spiritual fruit for the Kingdom. If we become detached from the source of our power, Jesus, we cannot produce any spiritual fruit. If we produce no spiritual fruit God the Good Vinedresser will come and cut us off and we die and then are gathered and cast into the fire to be burned. **Produce or Die...**

What does NOT produce spiritual fruit? Sitting in a committee meeting in and of itself does not produce fruit. Talking about doing something in and of itself doesn’t produce spiritual fruit. Having a plan without first asking God what God’s plan is doesn’t produce spiritual fruit. God blesses that which God has blessed. Church activity for the sake of activity alone doesn’t grow the church. Being inside the church building doesn’t produce any more fruit than sitting in Heinz Field makes us Troy Pollamalu. Believing in our head without acting upon those beliefs doesn’t produce any more spiritual fruit than thinking in our head about going on a diet makes us thin. But actions that don’t produce spiritual fruit don’t matter much either. We can cut the grass in the back yard but that doesn’t pick the apricots from the tree; sitting on the back porch talking about watering the flowers doesn’t make the garden grow.

What is spiritual fruit? First it is something which God does within us through His Holy Spirit. By its very definition it is something that God does first on the inside of us and then through us to produce spiritual

fruit. Second it is something God has planned and it is not our plan; most people are pretty good at coming up with plans for God to do and then asking God “for a little help” with their plan. No, spiritual people want to be on a spiritual agenda that comes from God, not from their own mind. And then it is spiritual actions consonant with God’s spiritual plan and getting ourselves and getting others more and more on to God’s agenda that will produce spiritual fruit for the Kingdom. Just “doing good” isn’t good enough; the doing and the goodness have to be part and parcel of God’s plan or it will ultimately produce nothing for the Kingdom.

How many disciples does it take to make one new Christian? How many branches does it take to bear spiritual fruit in just one person’s life? In Pittsburgh Presbytery when I was there they asked for churches to report how many adult baptisms were conducted by all the churches. Answer: 45 How many Presbyterians are there in Pittsburgh Presbytery? Answer: 45,000 It requires 45,000 branches to produce 45 sweet apricots. Produce or die...Today’s the congregational meeting where we look at reports and reports list some of the outcomes, some of the spiritual fruit born by the congregation. The report notes that there were 5 adult baptisms in 2010, actually pretty good as mainline churches go. But it took 800 branches to produce 5 new adult professions of faith. What would the statistics look like if just one fourth of those branches produced one adult baptism for the Kingdom of God each year? Two hundred adult baptisms. What would The Church of the Covenant look like? What impact would that have for our community? Produce and live!!!

The church of Jesus Christ has been spinning its wheels for at least 30 years, trying to implement its own plans, doing strategic planning its own way, asking God to bless its own plan, trying to accomplish on its own power and in its own way things that have little or nothing to do with God’s plans or bearing fruit for the Kingdom. Is the church better or worse today than it was 30 years ago? Today the church in America is sick and dying, a branch cut off from its power source. It is like my apricot tree in my back yard. And Jesus says: *“Apart from me ye can do nothing”*.

Spiritual leaders, everything we plan and do needs to be connected to Jesus and to produce fruit for the Kingdom.

Over in Laurenceville there is a former Roman Catholic Church that has been converted into “The Church Brew Works”. When I was at the seminary I went once and will never go again. It made me shudder as a prophecy of what happens to churches when they do not produce. The Holy Water basin is to the one side of the front door, the confessionals are behind the bar, the pews have been cut in half to create seating for booths, and in my mind the greatest travesty is in the chancel area, where the altar would have been, are now large copper vats filled with beer. Worshipping beer instead of the Almighty. My prayer from that moment onward has been this –May no church I have ever served so spiritually fail that it becomes a Church Brew Works. But above the altar, inscribed in Latin, is a Bible quote. My Latin is very rusty so I may have the quote wrong but I believe it is the quote also from the Gospel of John where Jesus says: *“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” (John 12:32)* By lifting up Jesus we draw all people unto Him. By abiding in Christ and He abiding in us we can produce fruit for the Kingdom. By seeking His Kingdom first all other things are added unto us as well. Church of the Covenant, we did a pretty good job last year. But we need to abide more in order to produce more in order to live more. Lift up Jesus and we shall live!!!! Amen.

**By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!**