

Daniel W. Klein and Peter Buhmann  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter – May 10, 2009  
John 15: 1-8

## Being Fruitful

Peter and I are businessmen. We provide products or services for our customers. We're good at what we do. In our work, in order to be successful, we must be productive.

Most of us – no matter what our vocation – are called to be increasingly productive, right?

“Do more with less,” is today's mantra – whether its work, or school, or taking care of the house. Businesses constantly measure productivity. Nations compare worker productivity. Maybe it started with Henry Ford's production line, but probably much, much earlier – how to be increasingly productive. We have numerous tools to increase our productivity – many of them high tech, like computers, Blackberrys, cell phones, e-mail – and some of us still cling to lower tech, like Daytimers and other calendars, to-do lists on yellow pads. Even our kids are overscheduled to maximize productivity, team sports, dance class, Scouts, perhaps a job, and always killer homework.

Most of us are on duty all the time, 24/7. Not particularly enjoying it, but definitely – productive.

So, with anonymous thanks for the idea from a minister named Meg Jenista whose blog I came across recently, I have kind of an impertinent question for you.

Was Jesus Christ productive?

If we were asked to tick off the five top attributes of Jesus, would “productivity” make in on the list? When we imagine God-Made-Flesh, do we visualize to-do lists? Sales goals? Contact reports? Let's see, five people healed today, three clever retorts to the Pharisees, one really excellent parable told. Considering our non-profit status, Judas, are we in the black for the first quarter? And oh, I made dinner for 5,000 people; better figure out what to do with the leftovers.

See, I told you this was an impertinent question.

The Bible tells us many things about Jesus' character – that he is Emmanuel, “God with us.” Also that he is the “image of the unseen God, the firstborn over all creation.” The Gospels give us snapshots of Jesus' life and from them we may glean the fact that Jesus spoke wisely, was angry judiciously, showed heaps of mercy and grace. Jesus rested. Jesus retreated from the crowds, but when he was with people, he was really with them. He saw needs that others could not see. He spoke gracious words that others were too busy to speak. He loved people well. But was he productive? Is productivity something you would choose as a key attribute of the Messiah, Jesus Christ?

My answer is probably “no.” Not that Jesus accomplished nothing. The salvation of humanity, after all, is hardly “nothing.” The cross was certainly an accomplishment. Every life that he spoke into was an evidence of grace and God-With-Us. But, to me, productivity connotes a mind-set of constantly moving forward, being busy, not at times and in moderation, but as a lifestyle. Always moving on to the next big thing, keeping one eye on the clock and the other on a to-do list with no eyes left to see the world – to see people. For as much as Jesus accomplished in his earthly ministry, the Gospels don’t depict a man ruled by his day-timer.

Productive? Maybe not. Accomplished, certainly. Perhaps fruitful. Fruitful. More about that in a moment.

The passage we read from John’s gospel is one of the more familiar to us. It is after the Passover meal in the upper room. It is that fateful Thursday evening.

Jesus begins what we now call the Farewell Discourse with his disciples. He tries to summarize what he has attempted to teach them during these past three years. He is preparing them for his imminent departure. For the most part they are not listening – they do not understand.

In today’s particular passage, Jesus speaks in very rich metaphors, in thick images. Listen again.

I am the true vine.  
Abide in me as I abide in you.  
I am the vine, you are the branches.  
Apart from me you can do nothing.  
My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Dan and I are standing behind the communion table today because it reminds us of the meal in that upper room. Because it connects us to Christ in a substantial way.

The language of the gospel metaphor is one we replay in the service of Holy Communion: “I am the vine, you are the branches.” It is one of those “I am” statements of Jesus, such as, “I am the bread of life” or, as we heard Julie talk about last week, “I am the good shepherd.”

Last Sunday Julie spoke about how we must give up our lives for each other – not in a literal sense – but more in how we use our lives for others.

This week the gospel compels us to think about fruitfulness. In today’s lesson we are called to be fruitful. What does that mean?

How is being fruitful different from being productive? Productivity isn’t evil or sinful. But it seems to be concerned with quick results, accomplishing things and being able to mark them off the to-do list, and then, taking it to another level, being able to show that list to someone else (or even ourselves) as a justification for our continued usefulness. Productivity is, at its core, the unceasing endeavor to be needed and useful.

Taking our clue from today's gospel, fruitfulness seems to require anchoring, being rooted to Christ, the vine. Being productive, on the other hand, seems to place us at the center, our own accomplishments, where we become the vine, not Christ. It is almost the classic definition of sin, Putting ourselves in place of God.

Why is it, then, when I am aiming for Christ-likeness, do I so often settle for productivity?

Fruitfulness is what happens when we reach out with hope, courage and confidence from the anchored place of Christ's love and acceptance. Fruitfulness is defined by Christ himself in our lesson:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. If a person remains in me and I in them, they will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

In the mountain sermon, Jesus warned about false prophets who come to us in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits, Jesus said. There's a danger that productivity and success can be the wolf in sheep's clothing. Being true to the vine does call us into a different kind of productivity. I imagine that some of the same "productive" actions may be called for, but with a different purpose in mind. Surely the skills of a business person can give great glory to God – they can be true branches from the vine.

The Apostle describes the characteristics of fruitfulness. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Against such things," Paul says, "there is no law."

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch-born priest, psychologist and philosopher who lived in the latter two-third of the twentieth century. Nouwen came to the realization that his life was worth more than the sum total of all of his efforts. Nouwen wrote:

We belong to a generation that wants to see the results of our work. We want to be productive and see with our own eyes what we have made. But that is not the way of God's Kingdom. Often our witness for God does not lead to tangible results. Jesus himself died as a failure on a cross. There was no success there to be proud of. Still, the fruitfulness of Jesus' life is beyond any human measure. As faithful witnesses of Jesus we have to trust that our lives too will be fruitful, even though we cannot see their fruit. The fruit of our lives may be visible only to those who live after us.

What is important is how well we love. God will make our love fruitful, whether we see that fruitfulness or not.

Was it Martin Luther who said, "When I preach, I absolutely give it my best, but then I go home, have a beer, and let the Holy Spirit do the rest?"

Fruitfulness claims, as its starting point, the assurance of God's presence and love. Fruitfulness allows us to be fully present in the moment – it is activity deeply rooted in the soil of God's grace. Fruitfulness is enabled by a fundamental trust that it is the Holy Spirit who is working at all times and in all places – in fact, is at work in us, busy or not.

Nouwen again:

There is a great difference between success and fruitfulness.

Success comes from strength, control and respectability. A successful person has the energy to create something, to keep control over its development, and to make it available in large quantities. Success bring many rewards and often fame.

Fruits, however, come from weakness and vulnerability. And fruits are unique. A child is the fruit conceived in vulnerability, community is the fruit born through shared brokenness, and intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching one another's wounds.

Let's remind one another that what brings us true joy is not success but fruitfulness.

Let us pray:

Lord, how foolish of me to strain in vain, as if my weak efforts would somehow mysteriously produce luscious fruit. The fruit I try to bear – love, joy, peace, patience, goodness – can only come from you. Father, prune away every dead and useless branch in me; every habit, every negative attitude, and every belief contrary to your word. I don't care what kind of fruit I bear, as long as it comes from you. I don't want to stand before you one day, barren of any lasting fruit. Today, I choose your fruitfulness. Amen.