

“The Fruit of the Month Club”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 9, 2010

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 67

Mother’s Day

Revelation 21:10, 22:1-5

Yesterday morning, I spent time with the ten members of this year’s confirmation class in our final teaching session. As you know, it was cold, blustery and rainy outside, and even though we were inside, there was still a chill in the air. Soon after our 9 a.m. gathering time – which is an early Saturday start for 7th and 8th graders – the power here in the church went out and stayed off for most of the morning. And so, we sat in the dark and talked about what we imagined heaven might be like. We talked about how it would be a place where differences are appreciated, where people behave decently, where we will be free the “drama” that so often surrounds us and consumes us.

I hope you have your own image about heaven; and that your imagination has been fueled not only by these images that we read about in the Bible, but also by what you have seen and experienced on earth – glimpses of the way that God intends for us to live together in health, in peace, and in community.

I have one particular image that I carry around with me. It is from a time when I was in seminary and worked part-time at an Adult Day Care Center. Every spring, we would pick a day to take a field trip picnic to a park on the banks of the Ohio River. This, as you might imagine, was a major undertaking; it required a team of volunteers to help the staff transport about thirty people – all elderly, several in wheelchairs, many with Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and other ailments – on and off a bus, to the picnic area, then, on and off the bus again. Medications had to be prepared and administered, meals prepared, packed and served – many of them needing assistance in eating. Getting folks in and out of the rudimentary bathrooms was a challenge. And considerations needed to be made for wind, rain, sun and bugs.

Does this sound like heaven to you? To me it does, because despite all of these logistical obstacles, I got to experience the looks on the faces of those elderly folks as they felt the gentle breeze and watched the river flow by; and to listen to their stories about their travels, their families, and other picnics they had experienced throughout their rich lives. With this group, I came to understand what it means to be a caregiver – the ability to offer the right kind of fruit for the particular season of a person’s life: whether infant, child, youth, adult or older adult. That picnic on the banks of the Ohio River was a fruit-filled day – it

required a lot of effort and preparation and, to the bystander, it would have seemed pretty uneventful, but for some of us there that day, it was a glimpse of heaven.

Throughout the story of the Bible, bodies of water – like the one we sat that day watching – were portrayed as obstacles to be crossed.¹ Moses and the Israelites feared they would be trapped by the waters of the Red Sea as the army of the Egyptians were in hot pursuit. Jacob, while camped beside the river Jabbok, spent an entire night struggling with God (and his own demons) before crossing over to finally meet his estranged brother, Esau. In the Gospels, Jesus and his disciples are often seen crossing over the other side, encountering storms and crowds that seemingly blocked their path. And Paul, the imprisoned evangelist, who is shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, prays that not even his captors would perish in the dangerous seas.

In the vision of the New Jerusalem, the river of life flows down the middle of the streets of the city. It springs forth from the throne of God, nurturing everyone and every thing that stands alongside its banks. There is an everlasting supply of all the essential elements of life – food, water, light and shelter – enough for everyone, available to all in every season. Those things that are greedily consumed (and therefore in short supply) in our world today are all readily available in heaven. In the New Jerusalem, there is no uneven rationing, but God providing without limits.

We are also told that the tree of life stands on both sides of the river. We are free to imagine that no matter which side of the tracks, or which side of the aisle, or which side of planet we now find ourselves, in this heavenly home, everyone will have equal access to this tree. The fruit of the tree is available in every season; a different fruit for every month of the year. No longer are there dry and rainy seasons, there will be no hurricane season, no time when the fields need to lay fallow. Also, no times of recession or inflation, no periods of unemployment, illness or convalescence. Each day, and each person, will be continually filled with the blessing of God's gifts.

This tree of life might have another meaning. Its twelve different fruits might also represent the different aspects of our life among which we need to create a healthy balance. The number twelve, of course, is symbolic – fitting with both our annual calendars and with the traditional Biblical number of Israel's tribes and Jesus' disciples. Just as easily, we could choose five or seven or ten of these areas of life, but they would include areas like physical, emotional, mental and spiritual; work and play, family and faith, relationships at work, at home, and in community. All of these different fruits have different textures and flavors, and

¹ Paul Johnson in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

our taste for them changes sometimes day-to-day, and at other times through different stages of our lives. Through the tree of life, God seeks to nourish us as whole beings; as Jesus said: “I have come to give life in its fullness.”

The way that I have learned to envision this balancing act of the different aspects of our lives is as a platform upon which we are lifted up by God. Each person’s platform is supported by pillars – some taller than others, some stronger than others, all of which can be built up and strengthened by God, by others around us, and in part by our own doing. These pillars, or fruits, or aspects of life, of which I list ten, include: professional, financial, physical, spiritual, social support, intimacy in relationships, family, learning, physical environment, and recreation. Periodically, it is important to evaluate the pillars and select which of them you would like to lengthen and strengthen. To do so, you will need to work, to pray, and to draw upon the resources around you to build yourself up. For, while in heaven there is no need for a Temple, with God ever-present in the midst of its residents, on earth we are called to become temples: our bodies, yes, but also in our minds and our spirits.

And still, we’re told shown something else about this tree of life: that the leaves of this tree are leaves of healing for the nations. This is a Biblical image borrowed from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel where the healing leaves were the Israelites, the people of God. Their calling was to soak of God’s light and convert it into food for the world. The Hebrew people, then, were to be agents of healing through a process which is similar to photosynthesis: converting God’s light (revealed to them through the words of the Torah) into healing for the people of the nations around them. In following God’s instructions about showing compassion to widows and orphans and strangers, the people of God were providing healing for the nations. If the leaves did what they were called to do, then the fruit could grow on the tree and feed everyone who passed by.²

Try to imagine yourself, then, as a healing leaf on God’s tree of life. We are all certainly grateful for doctors and pharmacists and health care providers who offer their expertise in healing, but we can each become a leaf of healing in some of the following ways: a greeting card, a smile, a work of cheer, a song that we sing, a bowl of soup that we share, even a hand placed on the shoulder of a friend. In these actions, you and I can become God’s expression of care for the health and wholeness of our sisters and brothers near and far.

These days, we talk a lot about health care and about creating a system that offers both wide access and efficient delivery of healing, but when all of us begin to be aware that we are healing leaves, then who can imagine the value of the

² James Forbes, “You are a Leaf from the Tree of Life”

healing power that can be released into our world? As I look around this congregation, I see so many ways that you are already involved in healing the bodies, minds, and souls of yourselves and one another. There may be no better representative group for this kind of life-giving giving than mothers, whom we celebrate today. They so often exemplify how healing is given in quiet ways, tenderly and consistently, offering fruit that tastes oh, so sweet.

Fellow healers, may we thank them today, and emulate them as healing leaves who have been sent among us by God, for through them God will nourish us and our world that we might experience a new age of health and wholeness. May God bless you my fellow leaves, and may the fruit you eat in every season be sweet. AMEN.