

"Knowledge and Fruit"

(Colossians 1)

This is a dandelion. I know this part of God's creative handiwork well because a) they seem to have a particular attraction to and affection for my yard; and b) my daughter believes they are the prettiest flower **ever** and takes delight in picking several to create beautiful bouquets that she presents with pride to either Gina or I every time she comes in from outside. It is interesting to me that for some the dandelion is the bane of their existence bringing furrowed brows anytime they appear and for others the dandelion brings a smile to their face and a spring to their step as they skip around holding onto a handful. Trying to decipher and decide if this dandelion is a weed to be eliminated or a part of God's creation to be enjoyed depends a great deal on what we cling to as truth. If you see the dandelion as an annoyance, then that will lead you, as it did me this week, to pull out my weed-be-gone and spray at will. But as I squirted, Olivia came wandering out and was clearly troubled by my actions. You see our knowledge, what we know and what we think we know and what we cling to as true, determines our actions. To make matters a bit more complicated, the reverse can be true, where our actions can help reveal to us a new truth that we could have never embraced through words of a sermon or listening to a lecture.

Actions and learning are inextricably interconnected. While I am sure Olivia will not stop picking dandelions nor will she as an adult wax eloquently about the April day in 2010 when her father profoundly changed her views; the truth is seeing someone spray a dandelion coupled with hearing our neighbors complain coupled with reading a book in science class where this one time childhood flower is called a weed all culminate together to shape our understandings and how we respond. Actions and knowledge; experiences, encounters and learning go hand in hand; they are not easily separated in our lives, nor are they easily compartmentalized in our faith. Or as Paul puts it in his letter to the Colossians bearing fruit and growing in knowledge of God are both important.

Before we rush into the scripture reading, it is good to review and remember a bit about who Paul was. To be sure, with the exception of Jesus, Paul is probably the second most prominent part of the New Testament. His letters and the letters his students wrote in his name, trying to continue his teachings after Paul died are only second in number of pages to the Gospels and Acts. And when you take into account that the Gospels are really written uniquely by four different authors, really Paul's pen makes up the majority of the New Testament. Usually, the first fact that pops into our mind with Paul is the experience he has on the way to Damascus when he was struck blind and heard the voice of Christ asking why he was persecuting those who sought to follow the Way of Jesus. We might recall Paul claims he was a Pharisee, a practicing Jew, who sought to follow the laws of Moses to the letter. Paul self identifies that he was from Tarsus, a city in the Southeast area of modern day Turkey. Marcus Borg and John Crossan's book on Paul reminds us that Paul was a city boy from the beginning and often the churches he founded and wrote to were also located in cities. He was urban, while Jesus' ministry took place in the country-sides of what we call Israel. Cities, in those days, were not the sprawling, land gobbling realities we know and love today. Cities, as Borg and Crossen point out, were densely populated, small areas and often walled for protection. And Paul made his living not as a pastor or church planter, but as a tentmaker, not the Coleman camping variety, but really awnings that he would sell to homes

and places of business in cities to shelter them from the unrelenting sun in the heat of the day.¹

After his conversion experience; Paul begins to establish communities usually made up of Gentiles who were already sympathetic and often worshipped in the Jewish synagogue without fully converting. Paul would often write letters to these communities to encourage them or try to pastorally settle conflicts without actually being there; which I think given the technology of our current day we could reinstate and I could just text message you at meetings from my pajamas at home, give it some thought. One community from which we have a letter written to was Colossae near the western coast of Mediterranean Sea in present day Turkey.

The concern that Paul seeks to offer his counsel has something to do with this division between living our faith by bearing fruit or gaining spiritual knowledge. To be sure, in Paul's day, teachers would wander from community to community trying to gain supporters for their understandings and truth. Many early Christian communities struggled with trying to sort out truth when an itinerant preacher would come through town and try to tell them the right way to do things and live the faith. Now whether it was one of these preachers who had stirred the Colossian's community; or one of their own members as was also the case, we focus on a bit more next week. But we can hear this tension from the very beginning of the letter when Paul writes that his prayer for them is to "lead lives worthy of the Lord as you bear fruit in every good work **and** as you grow in the knowledge of God." Both are important and perhaps even tangled together. Paul, being one schooled in the Jewish faith, knew how the voice of God sang over creation and the melody of God's voice invited all **of creation to be fruitful and multiply**. Paul takes that image of not just plants or animals or humans fruitfulness leading to more plants or animals or humans; but that our works and our knowledge can **also** be fruitful and multiply.

So often, I think it is easy for us to get caught up in our lives favoring one way of connecting with our faith. We convince ourselves that we are living faithfully when we go out and serve breakfast or bring grocery bags or volunteer for a committee or build a house or do something; do anything. At the other extreme there are folks who pray and read the Bible and go on retreats and practice different spiritual disciplines. We can end up, like our views on a dandelion, thinking that **only one way is the right way**. The deeper truth Paul pointed the earliest Christians to is the interaction of both that connects us and deepens our relationship with God. It is both serving and sitting; both giving and receiving that helps our faith be fruitful and multiply. The deeper truth is that the fruits of our faith can be both **unique and recognizable**, like the trees that produce the fruits that nourish our bodies. Some of us here might pair up serving breakfast with coming to a class on World Religions; others might find life in the connection between being on a non-profit board with listening to Gregorian chant; while others might link reading to kids with reading the Bible daily. In the end, as we become aware of what connects us with God, the moments that have the power to challenge and deepen our faith, there is the gratitude that we feel well up within us. Just as Paul begins his letter by giving thanks to God for the Colossians, he ends his first thought by reminding them that as they make this connection between bearing fruit and learning they too will find ways to give thanks.

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan "The First Paul".

And so, we come this morning to the table, where we are both fed and sent forth to feed others. We are invited to the table where all are welcome and then challenged to take the grace and love of this table out into the world. We gather around to receive so that we might share with others. In a world where lines are quickly drawn; weeds are swiftly identified; and we compartmentalize and categorize trying to keep everything tidy, perhaps it is good to challenge ourselves to realize that ***sometimes*** it is a thin, easily permeable line between doing and learning; between bearing fruit and insights into our faith; and to be open to the Spirit which moves in a loaf of bread broken where grace infuses our bodies to connect with others; and in a cup poured out where love convicts our hearts to reach out. So, this week, may you give and receive; care and be cared for; love and learn; not so you can distinguish between the two, but so you can be amazed by how the two need and thrive and conspire with each other to guide us into a deeper relationship with God.

Thanks be to God and let all God's people say, "Amen."