

## **ARE WE A FRUITFUL OR EXTINCT CHURCH?**

**6 Easter, Year A – May 1, 2005**

**Grace Church, Haddonfield**

**The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

Today is known as “Rogation” Sunday in the Church. We are preparing for the Feast of the Ascension this next week and Pentecost in two weeks. We are encouraged to connect with God the Creator and creation. The Church use to celebrate this day by offering prayers for the planting of crops. We use to be more connected with the cycles of nature. Later prayers for industry became part of the celebration. It was a season to help us realize our dependence on God and creation. That same sense is sorely lacking for most of us today.

The Gospel of John this morning uses the image of vine, branches and fruit. It would have been very familiar to the people of Jesus day. I spent much of my youth in upstate New York, in the Finger Lakes. I can remember the grapes and the vineyards quite well. I also have the image of vineyards fresh in my mind from the vacation trip to the Napa and Sonoma valleys last year. The vine is essential to the growth and life of the branches and the grapes. Many Europeans brought their vines here to cultivate the grapes that make many of the fine wines we now enjoy. At the end of each season, it was imperative to cut back, or prune, the plants.

Today’s image was familiar to the people of Jesus’ day. They could connect with it. They knew that growth depended on the vine. They also knew that pruning removed obstacles to growth. The goal of the owners of the vineyard was to bear fruit. The dead branches were cast into the fire. They were useless. Fruit easily was identified with life, growth and wine!

On the metaphoric level, Jesus is the vine. He is the one rooted in God from which all life comes. God is the owner of the vineyard. God wants to see life and growth happen. We are the branches. We are connected to Jesus. Sometimes there is a need to prune away the parts of us that keep us from fulfilling God’s will. That which must be pruned away may be our habits, attitudes or actions that conflict with God’s way. The fruit that God wants to see is our coming to God and bringing others to God. The metaphor invites the readers to contemplate this calling in their lives.

All of this leads us to reflect about what kind of Church we are today. Are we the dead branches, headed for extinction? Or are we the living community, growing disciples and bearing fruit? It’s easy to think that we are the branches bearing fruit, but is this an illusion? As Dean of Camden Convocation, I see what is happening in our area around Churches bearing fruit. When I started six months around, there were 22 Churches. We’re down to 20 now, and I’m wondering what has to be done to stem the tide. What do we have to do to bear fruit? How will we be growing, living faith communities?

You’ll notice a couple of items here this morning. This attractive wooden baptismal font and wooden pavement candle come from Holy Trinity church in Delair. It was located on River Road. I went there this week to remove items from a Church that the Diocese deemed “extinct.” It was sad to be there. I went with the Canon of the Ordinary and another priest. I wanted to make sure records; sacred vessels and vestments were removed. My hope is that we can find places for them to be used in other churches. I brought back a beautiful set of brass flower vases. Engraved on them are: Easter, 1891, Holy Trinity Church, Delair.

This Church came into being in 1889. It was an outreach ministry of Christ Church in Palmyra. It was consecrated on May 12, 1904. That’s just a little over 100 years ago. The Church was an afterthought, I was told. It was used as a training ground for seminarians for much of its life. 95 years ago, a

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priest-in-charge wrote a letter to the Diocese. He recommended that the Diocese come take the records and contents of the Church ... he said this place wasn't going to make it. It took a long time, but it dies none-the-less.

What went wrong there? The people in the Church never took "mission" seriously. There were few people and they only focused inside the church. They were insular and they didn't want to be bothered by the world "outside there." I was surprised how nice the building looked. The grounds were in good condition and the Church was neat and dry inside. But it was still EMPTY! You could see care and attention was given to the inside. A few people maintained a pretty Church ... BUT NOTHING WAS DONE WITH THE WORLD OUTSIDE. Now it is extinct ... a dead branch. The property will be sold, and nothing will remain ... except the few things we salvage from inside.

What does a living Church look like? It is a living branch, a church that is bearing fruit. It is a place that is striving to grow with its mission. A fruitful Church is focused on creating disciples, not just protecting the inside of a building. It serves with a ministry of purpose. A fruitful Church is a training ground for all ministry, lay and ordained. It has a plan and is committed to mission. These Churches have many people and are constantly looking outward. They ask themselves: What can we do next to serve God in this place?

These kinds of Churches are more concerned with getting out into the world. They take care and pay attention to the inside, but they never forget to look and act outside. A fruit bearing Church is looking for ways to be in the world and make more disciples. You can use some figures to get a sense of what's going on. These places have more baptisms and confirmations, both adult and child, than they do funerals. Does Grace Church fit these descriptions? Are we on the road to extinction or are we bearing fruit for Christ?

Today's Gospel challenges us to share the message of Jesus with others. It is our mission, and God's plan, that we carry the Good News of Christ to others. The majorities of believers are converted because someone taught them or invited them into the Gospel (Living Church, May 1, 2005). Bearing fruit as a Church is about: connection; community; commission; and, conversion!

Rick Warren, in his recent book, "The Purpose Driven Life", stated that our ministry focus is a life of God centered in Jesus Christ. He contends that the whole purpose of our life is to make Christ known to others. Warren notes five important aspects of living this out: worship, loving God; community, being part of God's loving group; being a disciple, trying to be like God; undertaking ministry, reaching out in love to serve God; and, proclaiming, telling others about God's love. The key here is love, a love that, as John says, "abide in me and I will abide in you."

Our mission is to take the Good News to others. We are called to bear fruit, to bring other people into the life of the Church. We are to be grounded in Jesus Christ. There will be times that we must prune what doesn't help, be they our attitudes, practices, prejudices and actions. A fruit bearing Church never forgets that it is part of the vine, a branch. It is constantly seeking to produce disciples.

What will they find here in Haddonfield in another 100 years? Will we make it, or will we become distinct? What we decide and do today will shape the answer. May we become great fruit bearers! Amen.