

The Fruit of Goodness – The Spirit of Mercy: Inheriting Kingdoms  
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Psalm 23; Galatians 4:1-7; Luke 17:20-21

Last week, we spoke of the Fruit of Goodness in relation to where we have come from – God's good creation – and who we are – those who have been proclaimed 'very good' and know it by virtue of our adoption through baptism. So last week, we looked to the past to understand the Fruit of Goodness. This week we look to the future to understand the Fruit of Goodness.

Hebrews 11 begins with the familiar words, *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* It is a reference to the promises of God and also to the Kingdom of God. We hope for the Kingdom of God and we have a conviction that the Kingdom of God is present yet not seen. When we are speaking of the Holy Spirit and the fruit of goodness, I believe we are speaking of the goodness of God and the goodness of the Kingdom of God. This is where we put our faith. We look forward to the fulfillment of the promises made to us throughout Scripture, and as I said last week, we get glimmers and shadows of what is truly good in this world. Those glimmers and shadows point us to a fantastic future, which can finally only be spoken of in soaring metaphors and powerful images. The great banquet of Isaiah 25. The promises of Jeremiah that God will dwell with us and claim us for his people. The rivers of justice and righteousness of the Prophet Amos. The promises carry us on 'eagles wings', as the Prophet tells us. After Jesus was resurrected and ascended, John of Patmos was granted a vision, a Revelation, in which he saw the promise of the Goodness of God as

*“a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’ And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ “ (Revelation 21)*

These promises and images give me a lot of comfort. But I have to tell you, last week was a difficult week. A visit to Maine Med on Tuesday to visit Ivan and Elane, new news about Michelle and her daughter, Danielle, and a memorial service on Friday for George Robinson all made for a down week and a hard reality check. The news about Ivan and the news about Danielle are not good news. The 'goodness' of life for them is not fulfilling itself in the way I would wish it and certainly not in the ways Elane and Michelle would wish. And so we continue to pray for them. I miss George a lot. He was such a gentle presence. The blessing there is 92 active years and a man who loved God and others deeply, which makes memorial services much easier to do. Faced with a week like last week, the faith in things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen are easily swamped. Some of you may have the self-will to maintain confidence in faith and hope when faced with the 'whelming flood'. I know enough now that I have to simply trust in the Solid Rock of Christ, as the hymn tells us, and that is all I can do. The fruit of goodness, the goodness we hope for in

the lives of others, the goodness we hope for in our own lives, needs an anchor and as Christians, we go in two directions at once. We seek the safe harbor of Jesus Christ in the midst of stormy seas, and at the same time, we go into the dark and stormy seas with Christ in the stern of our boats, praying he will calm the stormy seas we are already in.

Psalm 23, which we sang for our prayer hymn, gives a glimpse into our future. When I hear about the Kingdom of God, I always think of Psalm 23. If you want a *personal* touchstone for what the Kingdom of God will be like, this is a good one. The Kingdom of God is a place where green pastures provide rest; still waters calm the heart and mind; we are restored and led to a soulful life; Christ's presence allays our fears; God's guidance gives comfort; God's provision protects us; and we are blessed by the overflowing mercy and goodness of God. It is like living in God's house.

In Galatians 4, Paul speaks about our inheritance, an inheritance we share with Abraham's descendants. We are inheriting the Kingdom of God, to put it simply. In the ancient world, when a son inherited the father's treasure, he inherited all the father's property, which is how we understand inheritance today – a transfer of property from one generation to the next. But he also inherited something else as well. The son also inherited all the father's relationships: friends, family, business associates, acquaintances, and most importantly, reputation. For the eldest son, this was a future that was incredibly promising or incredibly terrifying, depending on the nature of those relationships and the father's reputation.

When Jesus and Paul speak of us, as followers of Christ, inheriting the Kingdom of God, we are inheriting the reputation of Jesus Christ. And we are inheriting the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are incorporated into the larger family of God. This is what we are laying claim to when we answer the call of Jesus, "*Follow me*".

Paul says we are children in our adoption, like slaves. He tells us that so we might understand the source of our value as human beings, the foundation of the dignity we are accorded – God and God alone. In that understanding, we see ourselves as growing up, as becoming adults with the capacity to make decisions and choices based upon a deep understanding and trust in the inheritance we have been given, in the reputation we have been given by our Father in Heaven.

In one of Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God, he tells us that it is like a field with a treasure in it. Knowing the treasure is there, we sell everything we have and buy the field (Matt 13:44ff). We claim what is ours. We claim our future in Christ. We claim our inheritance.

This is why Jesus answers the Pharisees question about the coming of the Kingdom of God the way he does. Notice the Pharisees ask a "When" question, but Jesus answers with a "Where" answer. He says, "*...the Kingdom of God is among you*" (Lk 17:21). We have seen in Psalm 23 what the Kingdom of God looks like, and we know it is our inheritance from Galatians 4. Here, we see the true nature of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is defined by Jesus Christ. We know the Kingdom of God because we are in the presence of Jesus Christ. It is important that you know the *you* in Luke 17:21 is a plural *you* – *y'all* for Southerners or *youse* for New Jerseyites or Bronxers. In other words, when we gather in Christ's name, together, the Kingdom of God is present. Or to put it another way, we know what the kingdom of God is like by seeing what Jesus Christ is like.

John 3 says, "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again*" (Jn 3:3). The fruit of goodness is enacted whenever the things of the kingdom of God are seen, and we can only see them when Jesus Christ is present. It is our inheritance.

Time, as I have said before, gets weird in Scripture. The past recasts itself into the present – Israel is rescued out of slavery from Egypt, we are rescued out of brokenness by Jesus; the waters of the Jordan are parted by Moses, the curtain of the temple is parted by Christ's death; Elijah goes into hiding from Jezebel in the forest, Jesus' parents go into hiding into Egypt to protect the baby Jesus – this happens over and over again throughout Scripture. The rabbis say it happens over and over again in individual lives as well, now, which is why the stories of the people of God are always relevant in every passing age.

The present influences how we read Scripture and understand God and Christ. The lens through which we see the past changes focus according to what we are experiencing. The present alters and reconstructs the past. Time is strange in Scripture.

Today, we see the future – the Kingdom of God – and see how it influences the present. The phrase for this in theology sounds horrible – *eschatological prolepsis*. There is no cure for it. What it means in English is that God's future for us makes itself known in our present gathering with one another. It means the community of faith is living into the coming Kingdom of God. This is why the Kingdom of God is among us in our gathering together to worship, pray, sing, mourn, praise and fellowship with one another. This is why Christ is among us as the gathered, covenanted body of the church. We are living into our inheritance before we actually receive it. This is the weird economy of God. We receive the fruits of the Spirit before we possess them. We enact the good things of God and share all of our inheritance before we receive it. We inherit the good relationships of our Father before we are supposed to. We are participants in the Kingdom of God now because we have gathered together in Christ's name, here, now.

So, yeah, I had a difficult week last week. Maybe you did, too. For some of you, I know it was far more difficult than mine. *The Holy Spirit gives us the fruit of goodness* is a statement of faith. And it is a statement of trust; trust that God has already shared his Kingdom with us through Jesus Christ, for where Christ is present; the Kingdom of God is making itself known. Do we believe the Kingdom of God is among us today?

If so, then we also believe, like the Psalmist that

*The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want.*

*He makes us to lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters; he restores our souls.*

*He leads us in right paths for his name's sake.*

*Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil; for you are with us; your rod and your staff, they comfort us.*

*You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies; you anoint our heads with oil; our cups overflow. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole lives long.*

This is our future and it is happening right now. It is happening now because we have received our inheritance through the work of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit we are given the ability to see the goodness of God and one another and all of creation, the Kingdom of God within us. The future is now and we are the inheritors of everything good and true and beautiful of that future. Because we are the inheritors of the fruit of goodness, we are called to be the fruit of goodness to the world. St. Theresa said,

*"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ's compassion on the world; yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."*

The Kingdom of God is among us because Christ is with us. Look to our future and live it. Be the body of Christ for the world now.

Amen.