June 27th, 2021 • Scholarship Sunday • Online Worship

“Bearing Fruit”
Homily by Rev. Larry Young

John 15:15-16
I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

“I appointed you to go and bear fruit,” Jesus tells us in his farewell instructions in John’s gospel. Yes, we’ve heard these words before—but how much have we really paid attention to them? We think of the Christian life as meaning we are to be morally upright and avoiding wrongdoing—but how often have we given serious thought to how our lives will be fruitful in God’s sight? What kind of fruit will be our contribution to others whose lives we touch—to the communities we are a part of—and for that matter, to our world?

It seems to me that Scholarship Sunday is a fitting time to think about our fruitfulness. We provide scholarships in the hope that those who receive them will grow as persons as they continue their education and become more productive individuals as a result. Now of course part of the hope for the students is to be able to get better jobs for the economic security they will provide; and yes, that matters. And yet education should be more than getting job security. In our United Methodist tradition education is about shaping lives to make some difference in the world we’re a part of. It has to do with molding character and values, growing in the awareness of our gifts, deepening our sense of responsibility for the world’s well-being, and becoming more compassionate persons. In short education should help us to bear fruit on behalf of the kind of world Jesus points us to.

Many of us have been around getting education for life a lot longer than you scholarship recipients—and hopefully our lives are more fruitful as a result. But life can become so taken-for-granted over time. So from time to time, we do well to ask ourselves, in what ways am I bearing fruit that serves God’s purposes in the world? What difference am I making to those around me? Perhaps the pandemic has given you the time and the motivation to reflect on that. Lately as I grow older, I find myself thinking more about what the fruit of my life and ministry may be; and I think that the use of my mind in teaching and preaching may be what I must have to offer now. You may be better able to assess that than I. But that personal awareness has been part of my motivation to continue leading Bible study groups and adult classes, in the hope of my bearing some fruit.

There is a secular term that roughly equates with living fruitfully, and that is well-being. Well-being refers to a quality of life that is fulfilling, satisfying and meaningful, both for individuals and for society as a whole. It’s become a subject for scientific study and is now being offered in a number of schools. In 2018 Yale University offered a course on “The Science of Well-being,” and 1200 students signed up to take it! It’s the most popular course Yale has ever offered—which speaks volumes about the hunger in our society for finding what makes life good. Now I’m sure many of the Yale students were looking first for personal happiness and contentment, which we can all understand. But one of the things they learned is that well-being also involves belonging to and serving something greater than oneself. Meaning in life comes from seeing one’s life as counting in the larger scheme of things in this world. Or in John’s language, bearing fruit. Making a difference in the world God so loves.

Now the chances are that a number of possibilities come to mind as we think about living fruitfully. We think about family relationships and friendships where we may share the fruit of love with others and have some positive influence in their lives. We may consider how in our community involvements we may contribute to the common well-being and be a force for good. Perhaps our work life may be a venue through which we serve human need; or we may have a gift for creating new knowledge or music or art. Whatever form it take, God has commissioned every one of us to bear fruit that helps
fulfil God’s purposes for human life and allows our lives to matter. That’s the highest reason for our being here on this earth.

At this point in the life of our nation and world there is a particular form of fruitfulness that I think God may be calling us to—and that is the spiritual fruit of hope. The negative forces of divisiveness, fear, and despair seem so overwhelming all around us; and the temptation is for us to draw back into our bunkers and lie low. But surely that’s not the path to well-being for any of us; and surely it is not what God has in mind for our world. Hope is a fruit that comes when we take seriously our belief that God is on the side of peacemaking and building up and well-being; and we resolve to live and act in that faith. Hope means we focus on what we can do to build up rather than giving in to negative forces. It is an outlook on life that we share with others, and which by God’s grace leads us and them to make some positive difference in our world. Bearing the fruit of hope is something we as Christians especially have to offer.

As we emerge from the pandemic, I think we all look forward to a greater measure of well-being. And in the ways we find to live fruitful lives, we surely will find more of what we’re looking for. As Jesus speaks to us about bearing fruit, he assures us with these words: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” May we all find that true for ourselves!