

(After the gospel reading, PJ goes over to the font and marks herself with a cross on her forehead. Then she pulls out a chair into the chancel area, sits down, props up her feet and begins to read her newspaper while sipping on her coffee. After a few anxious moments with the congregation wondering what's going on, a person gets up from the congregation and approaches PJ.)

P Um, Pastor Jennifer, exactly what are you doing?

PJ Oh, I just thought I would take a little break. Would you like the sports page? I'm already done with it.

P No thanks. *(P is a bit confused. PJ goes back to reading her newspaper.)* Pastor?

PJ Yes?

P Isn't there something else you should be doing right now?

PJ Like what?

P Well, it is Sunday morning. Shouldn't you be leading us in worship?

PJ Name, I tell you, it's really been a long week. This is the only day I've had to rest and catch up. I really need a little time for me, you know what I mean?

P But, Pastor, it's Sunday. All of us have gathered here to read God's word and hear what our Lord has to say to us.

PJ We did that last Sunday didn't we? *(looking around at the congregation)* Yeah, I thought so.

P And we have come today to praise God and to offer our Lord our prayers.

PJ We did that last Sunday too, didn't we? Shoot, I even prayed this week.

P Great! That's wonderful!

PJ Yeah, I prayed for that traffic light to not turn from yellow to red until I was past it.

P Pastor Jennifer, I'm sorry, but don't you owe God a little more than this?

PJ What do you mean?

P After everything God does for you, all the blessings you receive each and every day, it's like you are taking it all for granted.

PJ I beg your pardon. I know that I am a baptized child of God. God loves me no matter what.

P Yes, that is true. God does love you but it doesn't mean that you can just sit around and do nothing.

PJ Oh, really?

P *(with emphasis)* Jennifer, you are the pastor and it is time for the sermon! Now get up there!

(P heads back to his/ her seat shaking his/her head in exasperation. PJ sulks and mutters under her breath as she heads to the ambo.)

What's wrong with this picture? John the Baptist would say there is a lot wrong with it. It has nothing to do with me being a pastor. It has everything to do with me being a follower of Jesus. It has everything to do with me calling myself a Christian. What does it mean for you and me to live as Christians? How would you define your life as a follower of Jesus? What does it look like?

Does it mean that you just go to church on Sunday? Does it mean that you come and offer your praise to God just when you feel like it or the kids are singing? Does being a Christian mean that you offer thanks to God before meals or right before the big test or when you find yourself in a tight spot? Does being a Christian mean that you give God one hour out of your week and then you are free to do whatever you want with the rest of your time? Does it mean that you buy all the electronic and material toys that you and your loved ones desire and then if you happen to have something left over you might think about giving it to God? What does it look like for you and me to follow Jesus?

John the Baptist spoke to the religious of his day and warned them of the dangers of false piety and a laissez-faire attitude toward their faith. Did God need them? No. If they wouldn't praise him the very stones would cry out and offer their praise as true children of God. Did God want them to listen and follow? Sure. God wanted them to live faithfully as his children.

God longed for them to live in relationship with him and be blessed. God wanted them to share his love with others so that they too might know the love and blessing of God. These children of God were to live with purpose. Their purpose in life was to bear fruit. They were to bear their fruit and then let the sweetness of God dribble down the chins of a world full of starved people; people who needed to taste and see that the Lord is indeed good.

John the Baptist would say the same to us today.
We are to live with purpose. We are to bear fruit. Repent.
Turn around. Change your ways for the kingdom of heaven
has come near. The kingdom of God is here.
Jesus is right here among us.
And that makes all the difference in the world.

Here before us today is God's orchard. Over on the far left are
the peach trees. Then nestled down here in the valley is the stand
of pear trees. Next on this ridge are the apples
and then up here on the hillside are the cherry trees.
Jesus, the good gardener, has planted you where you are,
just as you are. Now what is your job as fruit trees?
Exactly, you are to bear fruit. Okay, we've got that straight.

Now since the day that Jesus planted you, he has been about the work
of training you, guiding your growth. He has made sure that you
have been watered, that you get the right mix of nutrients & fertilizer.
Jesus has placed his Holy Word in your hands. Many of you
have learned about God through Sunday School and VBS
and church camp and people who have lived the faith around you.
You come to worship and you soak in the hymns and the liturgy.
You come to the altar rail and receive Jesus' own body and blood.
And all of this is there to feed you, to help your roots grow deep
into the earth and help your limbs to stretch towards the sky
as you develop. And so you grow under the tender care
of Jesus the gardener and it is good.

Problems do arise though eventually. There is a cherry tree up here
that thinks that she would be so much cooler if she could make apples
rather than little old bitty cherries. There is a pear tree over there
that secretly longs to be a pine tree. He dreams of being
the tallest tree in the orchard and towering over everyone else.
There is an apple tree hiding in the middle who is fixated on
whether her bark is too knotty and therefore unattractive

to the other apple trees. She wonders if she will ever be the apple of someone's eye. But why did Jesus plant all these trees in the orchard? (To bear fruit)

So Jesus comes during the dormant season with his pruning shears to help guide the trees growth and help them produce the most fruit possible. He cuts away branches that are broken or that have been blighted by disease. This is truly merciful on his part.

He also trims back branches that criss-cross and those that have grown in the shaded interior of the tree where they won't get enough sunlight to produce fruit. And then Jesus prunes away the branches that are growing downward - growing in the wrong direction. These will not produce fruit either.

By trimming them away, Jesus allows us to focus our energy and effort in more positive directions where we can produce the fruit that we were made to grow.

And once the spring comes, we form leaves and buds and then fruit. Jesus will make his way through the orchard again.

From every tree, from every branch, Jesus will remove some of the fruit before it can ripen. Why would he do that?

Because there is no way that you as the tree have the energy and capacity to bring all your fruit to full maturity and ripeness.

So Jesus removes some of it prematurely so that you and I can focus and ripen the rest. Otherwise, we will get burned totally out and only produce a harvest of fruit every other year.

At the harvest, Jesus comes and gathers our fruit.

As cobblers, jams and pies or straight from the fruit bowl, we live on, declaring the goodness of God to those who partake of our fruit.

So what is your position in God's orchard today? What is the health of you as a tree? Have you lifted up your roots and refused to let them sink down into the rich soil of God's word so that you may be nurtured and grow? Are you still trying

to figure out what kind of tree you are and what God has made you to produce? Do you secretly long to be a pine tree / something that you are not?

Can you accept that God has made you good as you are?

Are you refusing to let Jesus trim back the branches that are growing in the wrong direction? Is admitting your mistakes and consciously going in a different direction difficult for you? Is it the wintertime, and Jesus has recently pruned you? Are you having to trust that the cutting was necessary and that you will grow even stronger because of it and eventually produce even more fruit.

Are you sad or confused by Jesus pulling off some of the fruit that you had really wanted to see ripen.

Which dreams did you have to watch die prematurely?

Can you trust that the fruit you do produce will be even sweeter because of how Jesus has focused you?

Pear trees, Peach trees, Apple and cherry trees, Christians, God made us all to bear fruit. That is our purpose.

That is why we are here. And as God cuts and redirects us through confession and forgiveness, as he feeds us with his Holy Word and the meal at this table, we grow and thrive and bear fruit.

The good news is that the kingdom of heaven, Jesus himself, is always with us walking the rows of the orchard, tending and caring for us.

How has Jesus called you to bear fruit? As the unique person God has made you to be, with your personality and passions and gifts, how does Jesus long to reveal who he is through your life?

As those who call ourselves Christians and follow our Lord, may we trust ourselves to Jesus, to his expertise and care, and bear the fruit of his love and compassion so that many can taste and see that our Lord is good.