

Pastor's Message – Good Friday, 2021
The Tree and Its Fruit
Matthew 7:15-20

You can tell if a tree is healthy, Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. A healthy tree bears good fruit, he told them. A sick tree, on the other hand, bears bad fruit. The way to recognize a tree, he said very simply, is by the fruit it bears. If you see bad fruit, he said, cut that tree down and throw it in the fire.

As was Jesus' way, he wasn't talking as an arborist, but as a teacher. His specific target was the false prophets who would sneak into the church as "wolves in sheep's clothing," as he put it. As we've seen, Jesus wasn't afraid to mix metaphors. False teachers may be able to dress like prophets, he was saying. They may wear the uniform, the Elijah mantle or the pastor's robe, but you had better watch and listen for the product of their teaching. Do they come with humility, gentleness and love? Do they bring people together? What do their disciples look like? The way to tell a sheep from a wolf, he was saying, is by the products of their teaching.

Good trees bear good fruit. That's the truth when discerning the authenticity of a teacher in the church or when one considers the truth and beauty of the cross of Jesus Christ. On Good Friday, our thoughts turn to the "tree" on which Jesus was crucified at Golgotha. That good tree bore good fruit for us and for all people.

Trees play a significant role in our holy history as God's people. There in the Garden before the fall were the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. The one marks our fall. The other marks Paradise Lost, but also Paradise Regained in Christ. The Tree of Life is there in Genesis, and it is there in Revelation. It is there at the beginning of the Bible's story of salvation and at the end in the new heaven and the new earth.

The apostles liked to use the word "tree" for the cross of Jesus. Before the Sanhedrin they testified: "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30). Paul wrote to the Galatians, referencing Deuteronomy 21: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13). In 1 Peter 2:24, Peter writes that "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." In each of these cases the word translated "tree" refers to the wood of a tree, especially the

trunk of a tree used as one of the planks for a cross.

In the Middle Ages artists sometimes depicted Jesus crucified on a tree, even on the tree of life. One such piece is displayed in the Galleria dell Accademia in Florence, Italy. You have to look for it and may be distracted by a slightly better-known work known as Michelangelo's "David." "The Tree of Life," painted by 14th-century artist Pacino di Bonaguida, depicts Jesus suspended on the tree of life. The tree has 12 branches, with the fruit on each depicting a cherished event of the sacred story, such as the annunciation; the Nativity; the presentation of Christ in the temple; his Baptism; his Transfiguration; his teaching; and his institution of the Lord's Supper; his resurrection and ascension. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil appears at the base of the painting as well as a defeated Satan.

The painting clearly shows the cross to be at the center of everything. Our holy history converges on and flows out of the cross, and the cross is the tree of life! The message is clear. This is why he came, and this is what we have because of him. He died so that we might live.

As we see Christ suspended from a tree so rich with life and fruit, it may be easy to miss his suffering there. Later artists began to show us Jesus' wounds on the cross. It may be that the terrible suffering resulting from the Great Plague in Europe led to artists presenting a truly suffering Christ on the cross. For everyone who receives Christ, the suffering associated with the Passion and crucifixion of Christ brings an added fruit—that as Christ overcame his suffering, we can overcome ours, that love makes bearing pain possible.

The Bible begins with a Tree of Life, and with the tree of life on which Jesus hung, the grace of forgiveness and salvation found its beginning, which has flourished and grown through the ages and will culminate in not just one, but twelve trees of life with every grace imaginable.

It is because the possibility of life has been returned to sinful humanity that we can take hope. Because of Jesus' tree of life, hope is a reality and life expands to be fully realized in heaven. Jesus' tree of life offers hope for tomorrow, proof of God's love and desire that none might be lost. Forgiveness is offered, salvation is won, death and sin and despair do not have the last word. "Though [we may] endure many trials for a little while," Peter writes in his 1st Letter, "There is wonderful joy ahead."

In the life offered by Jesus' suffering and death, the end of our suffering is in sight and that is why we call this Friday good. Amen.