

feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

January 16, 2013

Dearest family,



That was quite a mouthful of “cud” to chew this past Sunday! (If you weren’t there you might not understand that!) It was Eugene Petersen who observed that you cannot go any further into the Psalms, into this praise and prayer manual, the worship cathedral and the intercession room of scripture, without tripping over the enormous roots of that tree in Ps.1:3. The fact is there is **no fruit without root**. As Isaiah put it, “*Take root downward and bear fruit upward.*” (Isa. 37:31) In scripture, the phrases “root and fruit” and “root and branch” are a summary of the totality of life. The root is the image for a godly person, for a godly nation, for a life that has been restored (Ps. 80:9, Jer. 17:7) It’s a symbol of messianic hope, of future hope; of God’s blessings and promises. When God strikes a tree and its roots it is an image of God’s opposition to self-derived personal security.

Roots are the hidden life, as it were. So how’s your hidden root system? If all we are is all people see of us we’re probably in trouble. The gospels give an alarming illustration of Jesus’ response to a tree that was nothing but leaves. (Mt. 21:19) The point is that if you take care of your roots, the fruit will take care of itself. The

quality of the root in the natural world determines the **quality of the fruit**. I did a lot of study many years ago on **root systems**. You should have seen my PA in those days when I walked into my church office with armfuls of tree books that I’d got from the library. She thought I was using church time to do my gardening! I learned lots of interesting things about those roots:

- ***That pruning encourages strong root systems*** (ring any bells about what Jesus said he’d do? Jn. 15:2 “*Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*”) You see, pruning, by strengthening the roots, encourages a tree to grow fruit instead of wood and it lets a tree bear fruit earlier, thus more fruit.
- ***In nature there is a balance between what’s called “roots and tops”***. A tree cannot put out its branches more widely than its root system. Our capacities to provide ministry or a canopy to others is utterly determined by our rootedness in Christ. If you nurture your hidden life in Christ, your manifest life will nourish others like a plant or tree, if you get dry you wither. This is directly cited by Hosea talking of Ephraim: “*Their root is withered; they bear no fruit.*” (9:16) Maybe you can do your own study on what the Bible teaches about withering. (Begin with Jesus’ teaching in John 15 and Matthew 13) It is always the direct result of a failure in discipleship, a failure to take care of the essential spiritual roots of our lives.
- ***I learned that as big as the roots may appear, the key factor is the system made up of a myriad tiny hairs on the root***, that though insignificant and hidden are the means by which the moisture and nutrients are drawn into the tree – what an image for the accumulated effects of a thousand tiny obediences, a thousand tiny acts of faithfulness, a thousand engagements with scripture.
- ***I summarized all that I had discovered, and determined that all root systems serve the same three-fold purpose: (after each characteristic is a quote from a botany text!)***
 - **STABILITY:** “*they hold the plant in position and resist the stresses of wind and gravity.*”
 - **SUSTENANCE:** “*they absorb water which contains the nutrients needed for growth*”
 - **STORAGE:** “*they serve as a reservoir for food that is not immediately needed by the plant.*”

This law of natural life is exactly what you find in the spiritual life. Listen to Jer. 17:7: “*Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord...he will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream...*”

Let's break that down: "*roots by the stream*" (rootedness); "*does not fear when heat comes*" (stability); "*leaves always green*" (sustenance); "*no worries in the year of drought*" (storage); "*never fails to bear fruit*" (fruitfulness). Marvelous! Root and fruit!

The same principles are at work in the way the root-fruit image is used in the NT. As Jesus said in his parable, it's all about the root but also the soil: "*As therefore you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*" (Col. 2:7) "*Being rooted and established in love...*" (Eph. 3:17)

So the soil is: *Jesus Christ* (rooted in him); *Love* (rooted in love); *the truth of the apostolic faith* (as you received...rooted). Here are the same principles for flourishing in one's life instead of failing and fading: "*established in love*" (stability); "*built up in him*" (sustenance); "*strengthened in faith*" (storage); "*abounding in thanksgiving*" (fruit). It's all about root and fruit. No root, no fruit. Anyway you look at it, whether it's natural or supernatural, the physical or spiritual world, **the quality of the root determines the quality of the fruit.**

Paul uses this "root" image in Romans 11:16 – "*If the root is holy so are the branches.*" That raises another question. We've already referred to some implied questions. What if the tree is not near Psalm 1's stream? What if the tree is in the bad soil Jesus referred to? But in Paul's terms, what if the root is not holy? The Bible does acknowledge these other kinds of root, that if they are feeding the plant will produce bad fruit. To use Paul's phrase to Timothy, there *is* "*a root of all kinds of evil*". The one he happens to mention is the love of money for its own sake (1 Tim. 6:10). The writer to the Hebrews acknowledges that if we miss the grace of God, whether by rejecting it or resisting it, whether by frustrating it or abusing it, roots can grow that end up not only causing trouble and defiling our lives, but also the lives of other people. Like Esau, the fruit that came from the root of bitterness resulted in terrible brokenness, envy, despair, irreconciliation, enmity and on and on. How attractive then is this Psalm 1 tree? How much do we want to be the man or woman whose roots are of the Psalm 1 kind, that ensure that we are rooted, grounded, fruitful, and men and women of substance, not wind-blown like the chaff.

So how are your roots? How is your fruit? Do you need a spiritual "root canal"? Do you need to do a fruit inspection? Is this psalm descriptive of you? The idea is that hopefully it will be if you enter this world of the psalms. Otherwise, instead of their truths being holy compost for the fruitful tree of your life, they will be no more than a mulch of disconnected pieces, like dried bark, that though they may cover the ground and give an appearance of spiritual order and tidiness, may just serve to cover stuff up and actually hinder growth.

So you can see that the image of this tree in Psalm 1 has roots itself that go throughout Scripture. The psalm cuts right to the chase, or should I say, right to the choice. There's no "wriggle" room here, no gentle lead in. It is all about choices and you better make up your mind now, says the psalmist, before you go any further. It's a decision about your devotion. Are you, or will you be, a meditator in God's word. Jesus' teaching is premised on the same truth. He said, "*Take heed how you hear...*" Not any hearing will do. Not any relationship with God's word will do. So what's yours? Fruit, according to Jesus (Mt. 13; Mk. 14), only comes from the kind of word-hearing that **preserves** (not just initial but continual joy), that **perseveres** (does not quickly fall away) that **produces** (hear the word, accept it and produce a crop) – all as a result of a rooted word. We will return to this whole matter of meditation in the word when we visit some other torah psalms in our series. (How and why to meditate: its purpose, its preparation, its practice, its product, its promise – at least you have the alliterating outline in advance!)

Here's to delighting in the Word of God! Here's to saying "Delicious!" to use C.S.Lewis' term. Here's to healthy hidden roots so that there can be healthy manifest fruit. Good roots – good fruit!

Meditatively yours,
Stuart

<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)