**Produce Great Fruit**

“The best and the brightest.” It was a phrase used by some journalist to describe the administration of President John F. Kennedy. The same phrase could have been used to describe Saul of Tarsus who we hear about in the first reading today; a child of the best upbringing; a Roman citizen; trained in the best Jewish schools; groomed, perhaps, to even become chief priest.

Saul was hell bent on the destruction of the believers of Jesus. In order to understand Saul of Tarsus it is important that we put him into historical context. Only a few short years had passed from the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus when a self-righteous religious zealot assisted in the murder of one of Christianity’s earliest messengers, a godly man named Stephen. Luke punctuates Saul’s involvement in this murder with the chilling comment:

**“Now Saul was consenting to his death.”**

After the death of Stephen, Saul was fanatical about destroying this new sect. Saul launched a holy war against the Church, scattering the believers. He created havoc, entering homes, sending many to prison – even putting some to death.

Today, we know Saul of Tarsus as the Apostle Paul. He was renamed Paul after his conversion.

Saul obviously was not producing good fruit in his early life. But look what happens after his conversion to be a follower of Jesus Christ. He becomes one of the most powerful preachers of Jesus in all of history. I feel like I still have a shot!

Some branches produce fruit and are pruned, cared for and nurtured. Some branches do not produce fruit and are removed, thrown away and burned. We need to prune those things in our lives that get in the way of living our lives with Jesus.

We are a people of productivity. It is, for the most part, the standard by how we live and measure our success. Those who produce are rewarded and get more. Those who do not produce are thrown out. Careers and promotions are based on productivity. Productivity at some level is at the core in all areas of life including sports, poverty, healthcare, and the elderly.

Some of you may know that for many years I was an assistant coach for girls’ softball at Neenah High School. Throughout the years there were many talented players that came through the program. Unlike some sports, softball has some very strict substitution rules which can make it difficult to get all the girls into the game. It seemed like every year there would be those players who were just a step away from being able to get on the field regularly. These girls were the ones on the team that could make or break the season. Why you ask? Because it is very difficult to be that person that feels like you are not contributing to the team. Many people think that if I am not on the field, I am not a contributor.

I am here to tell you that is the furthest thing from the truth. These girls in most seasons ended up being the determining factor about how our season would go. If these girls complained and created a negative under current they would literally suffocate the team. If they came with a positive attitude they would lift the team up and often times were the young women who controlled the teams’ emotions throughout good and bad times. They were truly being leaders, producing good fruit. You see, we have to be careful about how we put value on those things we do in life. With the sports analogy, it takes the whole team to be successful. One piece of poisonous fruit can bring the whole team down. We need to be careful how we categorize good fruit.

We have been convinced that productivity is the goal and only the fittest survive. I wonder if that isn’t how many of us live our spiritual lives. How many of us have been told, in some form or fashion, or come to believe that branches that produce abundant fruit go to heaven, and branches that produce less fruit go to hell?

Productivity does not usually create deep abiding and intimate relationships. It creates business transactions. Jesus is not talking about or demanding productivity. He wants a relationship with us and an intimacy with God.

Fruit or the lack of fruit, is a manifestation of our interior life and health. It describes and reveals whether we are living connected or disconnected lives from Jesus Christ. Are we really a good teammate? Fruit production is the natural consequence of staying connected. You see that in long-term friendships and marriages.

We have all had the experience where we lose touch with a particular person. We no longer know where they are, what they are doing, or what is happening in their life. One day we run into them. It’s a bit awkward. No one is sure what to say. There’s not much to talk about. There was no deep relationship and the connection is lost.

Other people we run into after five or ten years and the conversation immediately picks up where we left off those many years ago. Even though we were apart, we never left each other. There remains a connection that time, distance, and the circumstances of life cannot sever.

I think it is important for us to consider some questions.

“What fruit am I producing?”

“Is it quality fruit?”

These are questions **not about the quantity of fruit we are producing, but the quality of that fruit**. I am talking about the fruits of the Holy Spirit such as charity, generosity, joy, and patience. That is the deeper question Jesus is asking us. It is the invitation to join the conversation, jump into the game, to participate, and to live fully alive with Jesus Christ. That only happens when the life, love, and holiness of Christ flows in and through us. We then become an extension of his life, love, and holiness.

It is a relationship of union just as the branch is united to the vine. We live our lives as one. This is not just about relationship with Jesus; it affects and is the basis for our relationships with one another. If the love we have for Jesus, one another, and ourselves becomes one love, we soon discover we are living one life, and the fruit of that life and love is abundant, overflowing, and glorifies the Father. Don’t be that rotten apple, be the team player with Jesus and your fruit will always be of the highest quality.