
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

August 3, 2014

*“In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit,
and every rotten tree produces bad fruit.”*
Matthew 7:17 (Common English Bible)

Behind every debate that rages now – whether it’s about abortion, poverty, gun control or sexuality – lays the question of what is good and what is bad. Listen to any politician or lobbyist today and you’ll hear them say: “For me it’s a moral issue.” What is suggested by all this hubris is that morality doesn’t take care of itself; that society must determine what is right and what is wrong and then legislate that understanding. Rejected by this approach is any sense of an inner moral compass that directs the lives of individuals and societies.

Now what happens by this view is a considerable body of legislation – parameters for right conduct. A code for “right living” is imposed often with clear consequences for transgressions. Battles may be raged by opposing viewpoints but once the question has been settled in legislation, freedom of conscience is limited to opinion, not practice. Ours is a world directed by laws rather than by the heart.

Jesus rejects that pattern for life with one another. There are dangers with any external morality; most dangerous of all is the viciousness that spills forth toward individuals who dishonor the established code. Finger-pointing and hostile pronouncement of judgment rarely builds community – it destroys it. The ministry of Jesus often exposed the hurtful pretensions of the self-consciously virtuous. Jesus desires a community of faith not built upon the slavish following of a book of rules. Jesus desires a community that is established upon extravagant expressions of love. Rule enforcers and love rarely make compatible roommates.

Here, in this teaching from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus suggests another way: tending to our own spiritual health. Like a good tree, good lives are nourished properly and cared for intentionally. Planted in soil rich in beneficial nutrients and watered frequently, good trees produce good fruit. The good fruit doesn’t come from following a rule-book; the good fruit is a natural consequence of proper nourishment and care. Similarly, rotten trees were either planted in poor soil or received inadequate care. The natural consequence is rotten fruit. Jesus is asking here about the condition of our spiritual lives.

Rather than lives that strain toward the achievement of identified virtues Jesus asks that we pay attention to our relationship with God. It is in planting our lives in the Word of God and seeking the company and guidance of the Holy Spirit that our spirit experiences a rebirth. In this rebirth the qualities we value appear with the natural inevitability of good fruit on a healthy tree. Our lives then become “the harvest of the Spirit,” says David H. C. Read and not the proud achievement of the virtuous person.

Discipline my heart for paying attention to You, O God. Empower me with a desire to follow Christ more closely by an intentional plan of regular spiritual growth that my life may produce good fruit. For the glory of Jesus Christ, I ask. Amen.

Doug Hood

Appreciation is expressed to David H. C. Reed for his insights on this passage of scripture.