5th Sunday of Easter

God is glorified when we remain in Jesus, become a disciple, and bear much fruit. So what does that look like, becoming a disciple and bearing much fruit? Well, if you haven’t had a chance yet, look around walls of the church. Not only will you see pictures of the beautiful boys and girls who have just made their 1st communion; you can also see their Jesus trees. At Baptism, with parents and godparents promising to introduce and guide them in the ways of the faith, the children began the journey of being a disciple. This Spring they embarked on the next step, 1st Communion. They were each invited to draw a bare tree, and then in preparing for the sacrament, they were asked to add a leaf to the tree every time they loved like Jesus. Being kind to someone, sharing with a brother or sister, forgiving someone, praying, each could constitute another leaf on their tree; put another way, bearing fruit. Therese shared with me at coffee hour that her favorite was ‘teaching someone to play the drums’. At any rate, learning to love like Jesus is certainly bearing fruit!

But as I dove deeper into the Gospel, the importance of remaining on the vine, being pruned, the message from Jesus that we can do nothing without him, I could see we need to explore those aspects of this Gospel as well. What does that look like? How do we go about it?

Well, this week my friend Pete sent me an article from the New York Times by Rachel Levit called The Moral Bucket List. She may not have had this Gospel in front of her, but her description of people she has met who ‘radiate an inner light’ captures well what being a disciple, and bearing fruit look like. She also identifies some of what it takes to produce fruit.

She began saying that periodically she runs into a person who radiates an inner light. Isn’t that a great image? I’m sure all of us know people like that. As I look out, we have a church filled with people who radiate inner light. People whose goodness shines. Who listen well. Just being in their presence is affirming. Folks who do generous, loving, sometimes even heroic things unself-consciously. They are other-centered, have a generous spirit, a depth of character, to use Rachel’s words.

I agree with her that folks who inspire us like that aren’t just born that way. There is a process they engage in that brings about a transformation. I would say they let God’s grace have its way with them, they are pruned by letting God’s Word sink in, challenging and changing them.

I love a distinction Rachel made in the article: there are two sets of virtues, resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Isn’t that a great distinction? Resume virtues are the gifts and talents we bring to our work. Accomplishments. Technical expertise. That type of thing. Often resumes are about how one has competed well and come out on top. Eulogy virtues are the ones we hope will be recognized and remembered at our funeral. He was always generous. She put her family first. He was such an inspiration to others. She always had a kind word; he would give you the shirt off his back. Or, she really lived that message from St. Paul in chapter 13 of Corinthians about love.

It isn’t a question of either or, either success in the workplace or developing eulogy virtues, it’s about balance. However, our culture doesn’t balance resume virtues and eulogy virtues very well. Public education can do quite well at times teaching the knowledge and skills for external
success, but shaping someone’s inner character, so that the inner light, the light of God’s transforming love can shine – that isn’t part of the curriculum. Right there is one reason that our St. Louis school is so valuable – to quote the Catholic schools office: We teach it all! Science, technology, engineering and math, but at the same time the cardinal virtues, being a disciple, loving, forgiving, caring for others, Mission Day, bearing fruit by remaining in Jesus.

So how does inner character get shaped? Two of the things Rachel mentioned are right out of the book of Christian spirituality, even if she doesn’t explicitly say that. 12 step programs, which began as a practical application of Christian faith in the most desperate circumstances also hold up these keys as well. Humility, or facing our weakness, and moving from independent to interdependent.

Humility is a challenge these days. The media, social media, messages around us all the time say ‘its all about me.’ Self promotion. Bragging rights. I should be careful, since I have a face book account but never use it, but it seems to me that face book can often be all about ‘look how special I am’. But Jesus says in our Gospel today ‘without me you can do nothing’. It is about what God can do through me, not just me. When it comes to internal character, progress depending on God’s help is especially true.

As disciples we need to be truly honest about our weaknesses. More specifically, what is my core sin? What keeps popping up over and over? Where will I continually need to go back to God and ask for help? It varies from person to person. It may be selfishness. It could be greed. It may be a judgmental nature. Sometimes, a desperate need for approval can be a stumbling block.

While resume virtues are often accomplishments that result from competition with others, inner light, inner character is not about pitting ourselves against anyone else. It is about confronting our weakness. The competition – how will I be a better person today than I was yesterday? How will I be a better person tomorrow than today? It is an inner struggle. And we can only succeed when we ask for God’s help. It is about cross and resurrection. Sin yielding to grace. Remaining in Jesus. Prayer, the sacraments, confession; these are tremendously helpful in developing the inner light. Identifying our weakness, bringing it to prayer, discovering a person in scripture, or a saint, or a fellow believer who battled the same demons – all of these can lead to being an intentional disciple and being fruitful.

A second key: realizing we just can’t do it alone, nor even with just me and God. Very very few people are called to be hermits. Even monks have community. We need each other to truly grow in eulogy virtues. The move from independent to interdependent actually flows from humility. We discovered that our willpower, our logic, even our love for others are not enough to consistently keep selfishness at bay, or overcome the temptations of pride. It is so easy to fool ourselves. Disciples need each other. Friends can be a mirror that keeps us honest. We need those spiritual relationships, friends in faith who can hold us up when our cross is getting too heavy, and can push us forward to keep striving for the good.

Graduations are about to begin, everything from preschool to medical school. That means, at least in high school and on college campuses, there will be valedictorians and commencement speakers telling the graduating class to set their sights high. Be true to yourself. Follow your
passion. Make a splash in the world. What do you want – go for it! Encouraging our young folks is essential, but such messages can easily end up beginning with ‘me’ and ending with ‘me’. ‘I did it my way’ – isn’t that a recipe for self-centeredness? Disciples don’t ask ‘what do I want? Attaining it will make me happy’. They find happiness discovering the inner call, the seed God planted in them to make the world a better place, discovering where the Lord is leading them. What they can do with others, and for others. Disciples realize God put us in this world for a purpose. The only worthy path is to set out to use our gifts to make the world a better place.

Without humility, realizing we can’t do it alone; without God to redeem us from our flaws, and to transform us through the paschal mystery, we’ll never be a light. Yet allow God’s grace into our life, remain in Christ, develop relationships that can change us, and there is no limit to the fruit we can bear. Facing our weakness and learning to depend on one another can be tremendously challenging. But the joy that comes when we discover that the Lord is always with us, that true Christian relationships are like growing on the vine – there is nothing like it! Joy, compassion, humility, gratitude, mercy --- these are the fruit we can bear when we remain in Christ and attached to the vine.

The words spoken at many a funeral are filled with resume accomplishments. But oh, to live a life that is truly fruitful! Remaining in Christ. Learning to treat everyone with respect and reverence. Building bridges of care. Developing grace filled relationships by loving and keeping promises. Being a sign of mercy. Radiating the warmth and light that comes from God’s goodness. Give God a chance, and our eulogy can be filled with eulogy virtues, not just resume virtues!