

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Krista Welch, Student Pastor**  
**“Bearing the Fruit”**  
**Colossians 1:1-14**  
**Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**July 11, 2010**

This is quite a different letter from the one Paul wrote to Galatia. Colossians, for the most part, is an encouraging and uplifting letter. The original hearers and readers of this letter were probably feeling pretty first-rate after hearing such praises and encouraging, affectionate words. As readers of Colossians today, we are provided a glimpse of what this early church in Colossae might be going through and why they deserved such praise - and from Paul of all people!

It is fairly certain that Paul did not form the church in Colossae himself, but learns about it from a fellow minister, Epaphras, who is from this church. It would almost be like one of our ministers (Lib, Shelli, or Bill) going off and before they returned we received a letter from the Moderator of the General Assembly, Cynthia Bolbach, an important and esteemed person of the Presbyterian Church (USA), addressed specifically to Davidson College Presbyterian Church, telling us how great we are in our faith and in all that we are doing and how she and others (including Lib, Shelli, or Bill) are praying for us! Wouldn't that make your heart flutter!

But as we all know, there is not a church anywhere that is perfect. The church in Colossae was having a few issues of its own, involving many competing cultures, philosophies, and religions. In particular, there was a group that had a kind of spiritual and intellectual snobbery that limited the knowledge of the truths of the gospel, and therefore salvation was only “reached” by a few chosen, making an “elite” class of Christians.

But Paul is saying this is all wrong! Paul says that salvation has already been given, and we have it by faith alone. He says that Christianity, the gospel, the result of faith is not only a “heady”, brainy, thinking thing, but it also has practical ramifications. The words he uses, *Sophia* meaning wisdom, and *Sunesei* meaning understanding, are both used in a “practical” meaning or setting. What we learn from the gospel and know in our hearts, we then go out and do something about it. It is in this that the gospel is publicized, made known, by the “bearing of fruit.”

So what does that mean? “Bear fruit?” Is Paul saying that we must do good things, to “bear fruit” in order to be “saved”?

Let's look at this in maybe a more familiar way.

When I was younger, elementary age, my grandmother would take my sister, brother, and me over to see my great uncle Russell, who was her brother. While they visited, we three kids would be outside playing and exploring. My uncle's place was a kid's dream! It was seven very green acres in the hill country in Texas that included a creek, and most of the land was overgrown. There was a more

modern two-story stone house, and also a genuine dog-trot. It was the original one built in the late 1800's by a settler. On one side the room was full of books and old things, the other my uncle used as his bedroom. Actually I could go on and on about this place and never be able to tell you all the mysteries of it. But one in particular was that there was this garden. All around it was lined in either a tall wooden fence or wire. At one place there is a remnant of one of those cattle ramps made of stone that would help the small cattle into trailers. And there was an old wooden gate, -----now this is coming from the memory of an 8 year old, but I would say it was about seven feet high.

My brother, sister and I would inch it open and sneak in. Inside the gate was a child's dream. Envision one of the most overgrown gardens you can imagine! We never knew what we would discover when pulling a piece of "grass." My favorite was when I pulled up a humongous bulb of garlic.

One year when I was a little bit older, my uncle decided we were going to clean that garden. And so we went to work. We clipped back overgrown rosemary bushes. There was a lot that we tilled, added fertilizer and fresh dirt, made into rows and planted tomatoes and pepper plants. We left one row for planting sunflower seeds – the big kind from which you can actually harvest the edible sunflower seed from, if you got them before the birds did.

There was one spot near the rosemary bush my uncle was adamant about what to and what NOT to pick... it was something I did not understand until after a little time we went out to check on our garden and there were two or three deep purple and yellow Irises in full bloom. What I realized then was that these irises had been planted years ago... probably before I was born and they had been left out there, forgotten, weeds and other plants grew over and through them, and for years they never bloomed.

All those years I played in that overgrown garden, I never saw one flower, until now, after having done all that work with my uncle. By just removing the weeds and adding fertilizer and watching the plants, the irises came back to life. They never died. They were just hidden and stifled.

There are many places in the Bible where the image of "the vine" is used to explain who God is, who Jesus is, who we are, how we "bear fruit." Where does that image come from?

We have a good example of a grape vine here in North Carolina over on Roanoke Island, where there is a an old grape vine supported on a wooden frame, thought to be the oldest cultivated grapevine, at least 400 years old. There are references made to this vine by the first English settlers. An article in the *Charlotte Observer* said the center trunk of this vine is nearly two feet thick, and "the vine now measures about 32 feet by 120 feet." This vine is a local legend; many, visitors and neighbors alike, walk by it and will grab a few of the amber grapes to snack on. Many of what are called "rootstocks" have come from this Mothervine, branches carefully clipped from the Mothervine and planted elsewhere to start vines of their own. Because of the rootstocks and vitality of this plant, the North Carolina state fruit is the grape.

For the last 52 years the same man, Jack Wilson and his wife have been taking care of this vine-pruning it, cultivating, and harvesting it.

It was that year in the garden with my uncle that I learned about pruning – the clipping back of plants and trees and vine, taking off the parts that have died, so that the plants are not overcrowding themselves or others, giving everyone room to grow, but not too much so there is still something strong and healthy from which the fruit or flowers to grow.

My uncle and I, and many people in my family, many among my friends, Jack Wilson and his wife, taking care of the Mothervine, and I can't forget to mention the **MANY** I've noticed in this town, are all gardeners – working and cultivating God's creation so they can produce to their full potential and beauty!

So going back to the question of what it means to bear fruit...NO, "bearing fruit" does not mean doing good things so I will get to heaven! But instead Paul is saying the opposite. Instead, bearing fruit is the result, and the reality of the lives that are enabled by the Spirit.

The trees/ vines/ and plants in these stories have not done anything but bear the fruit – it is the gardener that does all the work.

**God** is the caretaker of the vine, God is the gardener. God has done and does all the work.

It starts at the root - by us coming to know and believe in the grace and love of God. Christ is that root, the proof of that grace and love.

Then we become the branches, growing out- taking what we know and believe and going out into the world and sharing it with others. Kind of a reverse gospel. In this way instead of others learning the gospel by hearing or reading it, they instead are learning it by watching what you do, your actions – this is the fruit.

But it doesn't end there! When you practice and spread the "fruits of the spirit" – hope, love and joy – you learn and come to understand more about God, God's working in the world, and God's grace and will for your own life, so the root stock is taken from the Mothervine – from the church, and planted somewhere else and the process starts all over again....

We are given the freedom to do good works because we want to, because it glorifies God, because it is the result of the Kingdom of God- a dream come true.

But it doesn't mean it is easy. You learn from experiences, making mistakes, doing it over and over again. In any field the expert usually is not the person that is doing a job for the first time, but the one who has studied, tried, and tested (and still learning) his or her area.

I did not know about the Mothervine on Roanoke Island until this last week when a fellow congregation member shared with me a bit of the story which had just been in the *Charlotte Observer*, on Monday July 5. It was a story of how the Mothervine had been sprayed with herbicide from the side of the road, an accident – and daily the caretaker has been clipping off more and more that was dying from the spreading of the herbicide. But

the experts have been out there. There were several different quotes in the article saying “that any grapevine that has survived 400 years could withstand the test of human error,” and “vines that can survive so long on the hot sandy coast have some fight in them” - “it may take two or three years, but I think she’s going to be ok”!

Being a Christian was not easy, not in the early church, during Paul’s time, nor is it in our time. When in your life do you hear the most words of encouragement? Probably when you are the most troubled, down, or struggling.

The church in Colossae is not hearing from Paul –just because- although that is nice to do or hear every once in a while. It is because he sees that they might be in a time of struggle, opposition, and/or trouble. So it is in these beginning few words of Paul’s letter to Colossae that he writes of his prayers for them to have strength, the kind that only comes from God’s power to endure and have patience. Not just the ability to bear things, or as *The Message* says, just stand there and grit your teeth, but bearing them in a way to push through them, and turn them into glory, and joy. We are not just supposed to survive, we are supposed to LIVE-to push through it, and in the end give thanks to God for all of it. I know that sometimes in our lives it is hard to believe or see such joy and love in all God does for us, and it may take a really long time to get there...and that is ok. I think God is patient too.

So even though our church, or any church will never receive such an encouraging letter from Paul himself –we must remember in our own times of struggle and transition, this doesn’t mean our fruits or works today are any less important. Just because the fruit isn’t picked from the original Mothervine doesn’t make it any less nourishing or fruitful.