

**THE MESSAGE****Feb 21, 2010****Romans 11:13-24****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller*****Grafted: Faith and Faithfulness***

Growing up in Bedford, PA, our house was in the borough on postage stamp plot. My parents used every part of that property in some way. They still do today. The garden in the back yard still takes up 1/2 of the property.

There were a couple walnut trees, a pear tree, grape vines, and apples trees on that property. And for as long as I can remember we had two greenhouses, from which my parents ran a small business growing and selling plants. Vegetable plants in one and flowers in the other. Both greenhouses are roughly 20 feet wide and 40 feet long.

They are heated by the sun of course but each one also had a wood-burning stove made out of two oil drums. I remember cutting and stacking wood with my father on many days growing up. A few years ago my parents put in a gas heater in the flower house (as they put it). There is something growing in that greenhouse all year long.

The back porch of the house was converted into a nursery for starting seedlings before being transplanted in the greenhouses. Geraniums are the biggest seller. They grow some 600 to 700 geraniums every year – painstakingly transplanting them by hand. It was (and still is) as my mom says, “a labor of love.” I think she said that about raising me too with the emphasis on the word, “labor.” Over the years that little backyard greenhouse business helped to pay the bills, put us 9 kids through school, and keep food on the table.

I called my parents this past week to ask them about grafting one plant to another. I seem to recall that my father had tried it. He’ll try anything at least once. Our reading this morning from Romans is about grafting. So I called and asked my dad if he ever tried it. He said, “Yeah I tried it. But it didn’t work. But I know it can be done.” He said with enthusiasm. “Check it out on the internet.” He said.

So after our phone call, I went to the computer. I typed in “grafting plants” on Google and I got over 3 million hits. Grafting plants is popular but not easy -- so I’ve come to learn. It is very labor intensive and calls for a lot of patience. According to Michael J. McGroarty on his webpage he writes:

*Grafting is the art of attaching a piece of one plant to another in such a way that the two pieces grow together and become one plant. You start with a small plant that is usually grown from seed. This is known as the rootstock. To this plant, you attach a small cutting called a scion. This scion is taken from the desired plant that you would like to reproduce.*

*The rootstock serves as the root system and sometimes the stem, while the scion grows into the beautiful plant you desire. Or in the case of grafting fruit trees, the scion grows and eventually produces the type of fruit you want. So in reality, you have two very different plants, now growing as one.*

(See - [http://www.freeplants.com/grafting\\_fruit\\_trees\\_and\\_ornamental\\_plants.htm](http://www.freeplants.com/grafting_fruit_trees_and_ornamental_plants.htm))

Paul is using this image of grafting in his message to the church in Rome, telling the Gentiles that they were grafted into God's community of faith. Paul informs the Gentiles that they ought not think too highly of themselves but rather stand in awe of what God has done. God can just as quickly cut them off. Paul says. And God can graft back on those who have been cut off. God is the master gardener, the master grafter.

Paul explains to the early Christians how God's love and mercy relates to two different groups of people: the Jews (who do not believe Jesus is the Messiah) and the Gentiles (who do believe that Jesus is the Messiah). How can the two live together as one? Answer, because of God's grace and love for both. They are grafted together. Paul is saying that Judaism and Christianity belong to the same plant to the same olive tree to God's holy tree.

Here was the problem. There were Jews and Gentiles in the same faith community but related to God in different ways. So who was right? The Jews thought they had a better standing with God due to their heredity through Abraham. The Gentiles thought they had a better standing with God because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul is saying, especially to the Gentiles, that their "grafting in" to the tree doesn't make them any better. On the contrary, they are to recognize and respect the root of the olive tree. Holy roots make holy branches. Not the other way around.

Jesus used this image time and time again in speaking about his relationship with his disciples. "I am the vine you are the branches." Being connected to Jesus makes us holy branches. So... what do holy branches do? They bear fruit. We have been grafted in to produce for God because of our connectedness to Jesus.

I noticed an over-riding theme in this text, a certain attitude of thankfulness. And from that attitude of thankfulness the fruit we produce is naturally sweeter and better tasting.

Throughout the New Testament the attitude of thankfulness appears over 60 times. It's easy to say thanks to God when the skies are clear and there is a new car in the garage. The Bible encourages us to express thanks to God even when it's raining cats and dogs and when the old clunker is in the shop.

Paul says in Thessalonians, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." In Ephesians he writes, "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything." In Colossians he says, "A life lived in Christ should be overflowing with thankfulness."

Giving thanks is the Christian thing to do and it makes the fruit we produce all the sweeter.

Here's the thing, a sunflower plant turns to follow the sun (SUN) to let more light shine upon it. Giving thanks may not seem like a big deal but in fact, giving thanks is like us turning to follow the Son (SON) to let the rays of God's love and light shine upon us.

An attitude of thankfulness can dissipate the darkness within us and around us. It's an attitude thing. And if you are human then there are times when you need an attitude adjustment. Why wail about all the terrible things happening in the world when we can give thanks that God continues to love the world and his grace is reaching more and more people at this very minute. After all, where would each one of us be without God's grace?

Having this attitude of thankfulness doesn't mean that we pretend that the world is safer than it is or that people are nicer than they really are. We don't have to put blinders on to be thankful. We simply need to be open to seeing God's blessings flow into our lives in all circumstances. And they do. Because we are "grafted in" to Christ we live by faith and faithfulness and that means we live a certain way in spite of all the ugliness in the world.

Mike loved his new red turbo-charged sports car. He was terribly upset the day it was stolen. I would be too! The police found it a few days later - stripped and gutted. Mike was so depressed he didn't know what to do... until he got an idea... on his way to the junkyard. Instead of dumping his beloved wreck there -- he had them crush it into a two foot by three foot cube. It now serves as a coffee table in his living room, and he serves drinks from custom hubcaps. That story suggests how we are to live our lives; how to face the troubles we encounter in this life. Turn them into something else. Turn a wrecked car into a coffee table.

Sometimes bad things happen to us. Sometimes we *do* have reason to complain. That's when we need to be reminded that we are "grafted in" and "rooted to" Christ Jesus. And because of that relationship God can compress our problems into something useful.

We get stuck in the junkyard moaning about how beautiful our car used to be. All the while God wants to give us a ride home, a ride to our heavenly home by traveling through life in this world.

God is growing us and shaping us in a certain kind of people. Fruit producers. We produce good fruit not because we *have* to, but because we *get* to.

Have you ever loved someone because you had to? Contrast that with loving someone because you get to.

Have you ever held onto something good because you had to? Contrast that with holding on to something good because you get to.

Have you ever extended hospitality to a stranger, served someone, or shared your faith story because you had to? Contrast that with hospitality and faith sharing because you get to.

Our world is in desperate need of people who can bear good fruit, desperate to feel God's love and grace in their lives, hungry for the sweet taste of the fruits of the kingdom of God. We are to be such fruit producers. This is our calling in Christ. Not because we have to but because we get to. We are grafted in.

So will you join me in bearing good fruit with thankfulness because of God's goodness in our lives?

God is good!

All the time!

And all the time,

God is good! May the fruits we produce show it! Amen.