

“Bearing Much Fruit”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—April 11, 2021

***“By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit;
so you will be My disciples.” (John 15:8)***

Most of us would agree that there is incredible energy evident in nature at this time of year. Bursting out of the ground are tulips and daffodils. Budding on bare branches are thousands of new blossoms and leaves. Birds are chirping in the mornings, and soon will be laying eggs that will bring forth new life. Grass is growing, and yes, weeds too. Vegetables in our gardens are starting to reach for the sky and to branch out. And fruit trees are awakening from their winter slumber, soaking in the warmth, drinking in the rains, in an effort to bring forth their fruits once again.

The Lord spoke words along these lines toward the end of His life on earth, during the Last Supper in fact. We know that He used that time to prepare His disciples for the things to come, reminding them of why He had come and what their purpose was as His followers. One such encapsulation of that purpose came in the familiar words, “I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit” (John 15:5). There it is—a vine with the incredibly powerful life force of the Lord energizing it to bring forth fruit. So not only do we see the world springing to life all around us at this time of year, but we also have here a reminder of the Lord’s constant aim in His workings with us—to bring us to life through life-giving actions. “By this My Father is glorified,” He said, “that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:8).

In this context, I draw your attention to the very first thing said in the work *Doctrine of Life*: “Religion is a way of life, and its life is the doing of good” (heading to nos. 1-8). I’d like to take just a small tangent to mention why our church exists. The way we are currently articulating it is: “To help people live a heavenly life through the teachings of the Lord God Jesus Christ in His Second Coming.” Today I’d like us to focus attention on the “living a heavenly life” part, and to see it as synonymous with the Lord’s call to bear much fruit. Yes we worship, and yes we learn from the Word. But the whole point of religious devotion and learning is to show up in authentically New Church ways. The reason we exist as a church is to help each other put our faith into practice, to make choices based on spiritual principles every single day.

So let’s spend some time today considering what it means to live as the Lord intends, through the lens of the branches of the vine made fruitful by the Lord. And let’s use the *Doctrine of Life*—a work of Heavenly Doctrines designed to describe what a good and heavenly life looks like, as a means to take away a few things that we are inspired to do based on our exploration.

Abiding. The first requirement that the Lord articulates is to turn to Him as the source. “He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit” (John 15:5). Those words are preceded with the reality: “I am the vine,” and they are followed by the direct statement, “without Me you can do nothing” (Ibid.). There are thousands of teachings in the Heavenly Doctrines to which we could turn to remind us of this fundamental truth, but let’s focus on the way it’s

delivered to us in the *Doctrine of Life*.

The second chapter is titled, “No one can of themselves do good that is good” (heading to nos. 9ff). The prime distinction is good (which really isn’t good) from ourselves, or good (that really is good) from God or the Lord.

The first paragraph in that chapter lists a bunch of things that most of us would consider to be good actions—things many of us aspire to do:

A person gives to the poor, donates to the needy, contributes to churches and shelters, looks out for the welfare of their church, country and fellow citizens, regularly goes to church, devoutly listens then and prays, reads the Word and books of piety, and thinks about salvation.... If they do them from God, they are good. If they do them from themselves, they are not good. (*Doctrine of Life* 9)

A few paragraphs later this same list is expanded to include someone who is “just in their judgments, honest in their business dealings, and upright in what they do” (*Doctrine of Life* 24). Again, impressive things, and most of us could fill our days striving demonstrate that we are just and honest and upright. But the point is that they must be done from the Lord. We must do them because He is asking us to. Yes the Lord will work with our mixed motives, but He is constantly calling us to get rid of self-aggrandizement in these actions, or to let go of the concept of earning our way to heaven, or do to the things that we do be “seen by men” as was said of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:5).

Another way of thinking about this list, and the concept of abiding in the Lord, is to consider that going to church, listening, praying, reading the Word, and thinking about salvation are characteristics of a heavenly life. They may not be “fruit” in and of themselves, for again they are designed to center us and inspire us to be fruitful, but they are very good. They connect us with the Lord, whose energy is constantly flowing in the direction of bringing forth life by means of our cooperation; and with His Word, the fundamental message of which is that we have a responsibility to be useful, other-oriented people from the Lord.

Pruning. Implicit in all of this is the realization that there is spiritual work to do. In the Lord’s parable it’s laid out for us in the next injunction: “Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2). A few verses later we learn that the bad branches, the evil parts of us, are to be gathered up and thrown into the fire (vs. 6). Isn’t it interesting that the very call to bear much fruit, which we naturally associate with doing good and helpful things for other people, comes along with this consistent and pervasive prerequisite? It’s the familiar refrain to shun evils as sins against the Lord.

But notice how helpful it is to see this in the context of a vine that is very much alive and capable of bearing fruit. That’s how the Lord sees us. That’s what He is leading us to do—to realize our full spiritual capability, in this world and forever in heaven (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 1103:2). It’s just that He can’t do it if we place ourselves first, or take from others rather than give to them, or even as much as we give to them. It takes pruning.

For this reason, the *Doctrine of Life*—the work of the Heavenly Doctrines designed to describe what a heavenly life looks like—is almost entirely devoted to our living according to

the second table of the Ten Commandments—focusing our attention on the thou shalt nots. One chapter is devoted to the heading, “The Ten Commandments tell us what evils are sins” (heading to paragraph nos. 53ff). Then it goes on to articulate specific requirements under the commandments against murder, adultery, stealing, and bearing false witness—each in a successive chapter.

If we focus on the commandment against murder, we come to realize that one part, or branch, of us that is simply incapable of bearing fruit, is that of enmity, hatred, vengeance or a longing to destroy (*Doctrine of Life* 67). We could include racism as well as verbal or physical abuse. We know, when we’re not caught up in that familiar fire within, that these things have to be pruned. We’ve all felt the negative effects ourselves, and we’ve unfortunately all inflicted harm on others in ways that this commandment forbids. If we reflect on living a heavenly life, we can consider that no angel or person who lives in heaven treats another in this way. They’ve worked with the Lord to get rid of that set of temptations, and so should we.

We can take comfort in the fact that it’s not all about the hard work. We learn in this same chapter the opposite goods that come into our lives: states of innocence or freedom from what is hurtful inside, and of charity, and of friendship (*Doctrine of Life* 69). In summary we read, “The goodness opposite the evil meant by murder is the goodness of love for the neighbor” (n. 70). Think about that in terms of a motivation that the Lord can work with. That love for others can bear fruit in thousands of ways, as we find ourselves using words that heal and compliment, doing things that support and make a true difference, finding the space in our lives to be there for someone who needs it—life *giving* actions, instead of life *destroying* actions.

The same is true of the other three commandments which are the focus of this work. The branch to be pruned under the command against adultery is any “licentious behavior or obscene acts,” any lustful intent or action, including the “entertaining of filthy thoughts” (*Doctrine of Life* 74, 78). If we are able to shun these things—to prune that branch with the Lord’s help, then the opposite happens for us: we are led by the Lord to “love marriage” and “the chasteness of marriage” (n. 75). Again we can think of the vast array of fruitful actions that flow from that source. A couple who is actively shunning what is opposed to marriage will be led by the Lord to say and do truly loving things for each other. They will find ways to build up other people’s marriages. They will stand up strongly for the institution of marriage, and many other things besides. They will bear much fruit.

So also with stealing. As we shun guile, deceit and fraud, we come to love honesty, and are led to lives that increasingly exhibit integrity, righteousness, fidelity, justice, and trustworthiness—quite a list (see *Doctrine of Life* 83, 84:2). And with bearing false witness: as we strive from the Lord to live a heavenly life we will refrain from any form of lying or slander, and will come instead to love the truth about others (*Doctrine of Life* 87, 88). We will also find ourselves on a quest for wisdom, that again consistently points to truly useful ways of interacting (*Doctrine of Life* 89). Pruning, or working with the Lord to shun what is evil and hurtful, really does, in so many powerful ways, lead to fruitfulness.

Branching out. Which brings us to our final symbol from the Lord’s parable that we focus on today. We are called “branches” in this section of the Word. Again, we can think of that life force of the Lord, who is the vine, causing us to grow and extend. In the Heavenly

Doctrines we learn that branches symbolize extension (*Apocalypse Explained* 388:28). This branching out, or greater capability of being the loving and useful people we hope to be, will naturally happen as we create space in our hearts by the pruning we have been considering.

But on the positive side, we can and should consider the useful things the Lord is calling us to do. We could think of it in terms of our ruling or dominant love—the set of functions within the Lord’s kingdom that we are perfectly suited to do (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 140, *Heavenly Doctrine* 54). Imagine a person who feels called in early adulthood to become a teacher, and within a few years feels greater and greater capability from the practice and experience of teaching. Then this person is blessed to become a parent, and that same love of children has a new outlet—a new branch that can blossom. In due course, the kids grow, and the desire turns to mentoring others, not only through teaching but armed with an advanced degree in psychology, branching into counseling. Each of us, no matter what our calling, can discover countless new avenues of expression of that use—new ways to branch out and help, all from the inspiration and energy of the Lord.

Of course, branching out can also apply to the *array* of things we feel called to do. We may find ourselves willing to take a risk to lead a small group, or to take on a coordination role for extensions of kindness and care within our congregation. It may be service on a board, or raising funds for a worthy cause. These and many other things can be seen as opportunities placed before us by the Lord, to which a willing heart says *yes*. And each time we do so there is an extension—a branching out in a new effort to be useful.

Abiding in the Lord. Pruning what needs to be pruned. Branching out. These are all parts of cooperating with the Lord to live lives that bear much fruit. Within them they describe so many of the dimensions of living a heavenly life. We exist as a church to sponsor that life. We are born to be living examples of it. That includes, as we’ve discovered today, “regularly going to church, devoutly listening then and praying, reading the Word and books of piety, and thinking about salvation (n. 9)—that’s abiding. It’s also about doing the work that the Word requires of pruning or shunning any hatred, lasciviousness, deceit or slander. And it’s branching out in our unique and increasingly loved ways of serving, finding room in our hearts to care for those less fortunate than ourselves, or those suffering from one of life’s traumas. As the very last paragraph in the *Doctrine of Life* puts it:

Christian charity for everyone is to perform their function faithfully. For in so doing, if they refrain from evils as being sinful, they daily do good, and they themselves become their own useful part of the general body.” (n. 114).

So what are the ways you are called to bear fruit? What is one thing that you need to shun? In what ways is the Lord calling you to abide in Him, and from Him to branch out? However each of us answers these questions today or any day, we can be sure that we are responding to the Lord’s central calling to us, for He says: “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:8). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: John 15:1-8; *Doctrine of Life* 48, 52, 114; *True Christian Religion* 376

John 15

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

Doctrine of Life 48, 52, 114

To believe in the Lord is not only to think that He exists, but also to do what He says...

It follows as a conclusion from this that no one has in them a grain of truth more than the goodness in them, thus not a grain of faith more than the life they live. Thought that something is so may exist in the intellect, but it is without the acknowledgment that constitutes faith unless it is consented to in the will. Thus faith and life go together at every step.

Christian charity for everyone is to perform their function faithfully. For in so doing, if they refrain from evils as being sinful, they daily do good, and they themselves become their own useful part in the general body. For thus they also promote the welfare of the whole, and of each of its members in particular.

True Christian Religion 376

Charity and faith do nothing for a person when they are attached to only one part of their body (meaning their head) but are not anchored in actions. This is clear from a thousand passages in the Word, of which I will cite only the following here:

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 7:19, 20, 21) ...

If you know these things, you are happy if you do them. (John 13:17)

Those who have My commandments and do them are the people who love Me. I will love them and will manifest Myself to them. I will come to them and make My home with them. (John 14:15-21, 23)

My Father is glorified by your bearing much fruit. (John 15:8)

There are thousands of other passages like these. On this basis one can clearly see that charity and faith are not charity and faith before they exist in actions. If they exist only up in the sky or in the mind above actions, they are like images of a tabernacle or a church in the air that are just strange aerial phenomena that spontaneously disappear. They are like paintings on paper that bookworms are chewing through. They are like our living on a roof with no bed rather than in a house. From all this you can see that charity and faith are transient entities when they are merely mental - unless, when there is an opportunity for people to do them, they culminate in actions and become embodied in them.