

Pastor Letter: A Righteous Branch (11/20/22)

This week we celebrate Christ the King Sunday and we will also baptize and bring new members into membership with our congregation. As I attempt to merge this week's scriptural passages with events of my own life for this Pastor's Letter, I am reminded of my grandfather's poorly maintained apple orchard.

Following the death of my aunt, my uncle remarried. His new wife's family owned and operated several apple orchards and a well-known national brand company. By association with this family, my uncle learned how to properly maintain a thriving apple orchard. He began by trimming my grandfather's overgrown apple trees with a chainsaw because the trees had not been pruned for many years. He employed the rest of our family to rid the orchard of all the limbs that had been pruned from the trees.

Gradually the old apple trees produced an abundant harvest because the diseased, overgrown, and deformed branches that had been sapping the lifegiving nutrients from the fruit trees were removed. My uncle also began to acquire the art of grafting young shoots into existing branches. He experimented with combining various types of apples onto the same tree branch. He even successfully grafted a favorite species of pear tree onto his favorite heritage apple tree.

In our Old Testament passage, the prophet Jeremiah is chastising the disobedient political and religious leaders for leading Judah away from God's covenant, "Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD," (Jer. 23:2-3). The prophet writes that God will appoint righteous shepherds to watch over His chosen people, "Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD," (vv. 3-4). The Lord will gather his people from all over the world into one fold.

Jeremiah continues to prophecy about the coming Messiah, "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness,'" (vv. 5-6).

Just as my uncle grafted various apple and pear species onto chosen apple trees, the Lord is raising up a righteous Branch within the Davidic dynasty. This righteous Branch is the King we celebrate on this Christ the King Sunday. God is unifying the Hebrew sheep and the Gentile sheep into one harmonious flock under the shepherding of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, our prophet, priest, and king.

The apostle Paul explains in his epistle to the Romans how the Jewish people have not been cut off from the Kingdom while the Gentiles have accepted the Gospel message. Paul writes, "But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but

you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you,” (Romans 11:17-21).

My uncle discerned that the growth above ground on the overgrown apple trees are fed by the same amount of a root system underground that supplies nourishment to the living tree. When he pruned the unwanted growth above ground, the existing root system supported more than enough nutrients to the remaining branches to produce an abundant crop of fruit. We must always remember that a righteous God is forever supporting us through the Lordship of Jesus Christ, our King and may have to prune us of those sinful things in our everyday lives that are sapping our spiritual strength.

Our New Testament passage comes from Paul’s epistle to the church at Colossae, in Asia Minor. This passage comes from the thanksgiving portion of Paul’s letter, “For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light,” (Col 1:9-12).

We must always remember that whatever we do to enhance the Kingdom of God comes from Almighty God, especially when we are rooted in the Lordship of Jesus the Christ. Jeremiah prophesied that, “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land,” (v. 5). Although the Hebrew people are waiting for that righteous branch to appear, Christians believe that righteous King has already appeared in the form of Jesus the Christ. Our spiritual pruning may be painful at times, but we must remain faithful to accept the grafting process because we will eventually produce an abundant crop of fruit for the Kingdom of God under the reign of our righteous King, Jesus the Christ.

During this week’s worship service, we will baptize and receive new members into our Polk Presbyterian flock. I will ask each person the familiar question, “Who is your Lord and Savior,” as part of the traditional liturgy. I urge each of us to remake the solemn vow along with them as we personally answer that question before our righteous King, Jesus the Christ, and our loving heavenly Father, Almighty God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen and Amen.

Pastor Larry