



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year B – Fifth Sunday of Easter – April 29, 2018, The Lychee and Banana Trees

Madeline L'Engle, the author of *A Wrinkle in Time* said this:

We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.

Like Jesus says in today's Gospel, sometimes we have to prune away our branches in order for that light to shine through.

My grandmother's eldest brother, my Uncle Sai, had a home in Hilo on Kilauea Avenue and in the front yard there used to be a huge lychee tree. When I was a little kid and before they had to cut it down, I used to always remark on how I couldn't believe how much fruit that lychee tree bore. And one time after I said this, my mother told me how as a kid she remembered that tree, because one day she went out into the yard and saw Uncle Sai beating it with chains.

When I asked my mother why he did that, she said that when the tree is distressed and it thinks it's going to die, in an effort to ensure that lives on somehow, it bears fruit. And I remember feeling sorry for the tree and that it had to go through that kind of trauma to bear fruit, to show its light.

And then shortly after that back home in Guam, we had a small typhoon, what they called a banana typhoon. In other words, it was a typhoon too weak to destroy houses but strong enough to knock down banana trees. And so, my grandfather and I took a couple of machetes and went out into the yard and cut all the leaves off the banana trees. When I asked my grandfather why we had to do this, he said "If you cut off all the leaves, the banana tree will live because the wind will go around it. If you leave the leaves on, they act like a sail and they bring the tree down." And, of course, he was right. The trees survived and in a couple of weeks they grew new leaves and then bore much fruit. But at the time it made me sad to think that we had to cut away the leaves for the trees to live and produce bananas, to show their light.

It's not always easy, is it? This thing they called life? That poor *lychee* tree. Those poor banana trees. They had to go through a lot of suffering and cutting away in order to bear fruit, to show their light. If not, though, they would've amounted to nothing. And that would've been even sadder.

So, I understand Jesus's teaching today in the Gospel about the need to prune the grape vines. The old leaves and branches take nutrients away from the plant that it needs in order for new grapes to grow. After thinking about the *lychee* tree in Uncle Sai's yard in Hilo and the banana trees in our yard in Guam that we saved from the banana typhoons, I understand.

And then it makes me wonder: What is it in me that's old and unhealthy that I need to prune away in order to bear new and good fruit and to be a light for Christ?

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I think about that a lot and every couple months or so I go through my apartment over at the Cluett and I purge it of things that I no longer need—old clothes, unread books, tchotchkes that collect dust. Those are the obvious things, the material things that I need to prune away.

But then there are other things in me that I also need to prune away— things like the need to be right, the need to have the last word, the need to hold onto old resentments that really don't do anything but make me feel miserable, the unwillingness to forgive when I feel that somebody has wronged me, the need to be the center of attention.

I have to prune all those things away in order for the light to shine through me. It's not easy, but it's my call.

So, what about you? What do you need to prune away so that you can bear good fruit? What are you hanging onto that no longer serves you or does you any good? What fears are you listening to that keep you from growing toward the light, the light of Christ? What old habits and old ways do you need to let go of so that you can become a better person?

I can only answer those kinds of questions for myself and you can only answer for yourselves. But wouldn't it be wonderful if we could let it all go and be like the Ethiopian eunuch, a true light of Christ, and to have the openness to listen to the words of scripture and to be taught, and then to have a desire to delve even deeper into a life in Christ the way he did by being baptized?

The Ethiopian eunuch in our reading from Acts this morning, the Ethiopian eunuch was pure light. What did he have to let go of to get to that place? What were the things from his past that he needed to prune away? And what kind of fruit did he bear after he listened to the scriptures being opened up to him to the point where he felt compelled to the waters of his baptism?

We can't know what the answer is for him, but we can know what the answer is for ourselves.

And my hope for all of us is that this Eucharist, taking in the body and blood, the bread and the wine, that this Eucharist will help give us what we need to see that like Uncle Sai's *lychee* tree, the times when we feel beaten up may actually strengthen us. And that sometimes, like the trees during the banana typhoons of my childhood, that we have to cut away the things we hold on to that are dear to us in order to bear new and good fruit.

It may not be easy, but it's our call. And then we can abide in God because God has given us God's Spirit, and we have cleared away the distractions of our lives so that we can let God in. And from that place we can move forward as the light – light for others, light for ourselves, light for Christ, and light for God.

We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.

May we be that light for ourselves and for others. May we be that light for God.

Amen.