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Luke 6:43-45 New Living Translation

⁴³ *“A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit.*

⁴⁴ *A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thornbushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. ⁴⁵ A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.”*

1 Corinthians 2:16 New Living Translation

*For, “Who can know the LORD’s thoughts?
Who knows enough to teach him?”*

But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ.

What flows from your heart?

I retired early as a professor and went to the seminary. One of the requirements was that I spend a year training in a church. While I was doing this, the senior pastor of the church asked me to do some pastoral visits for him to various people in the congregation. It was a large church and even though he was a fulltime pastor, he didn’t have the time to do all the visits. Since it was good training for me, and since he asked me to do it, I was of course happy to do so. One day I visited a couple who were both facing significant medical challenges. I’m changing a couple details about this story, for the sake of their privacy. He was

being treated for an aggressive cancer at a hospital in Denver, and his prognosis was not good. She had a neurological disease that was progressive and disabling, and she was entering a phase of her disease where she was beginning to lose her mobility. This was not an elderly couple, by the way; they were somewhat younger than me. They had one child, an adult, who lived in another state and was only vaguely aware that her parents were sick. They did not want to bother their child with the details of their medical conditions because she was very young - and they wanted her to live her life to the fullest without being burdened.

They lived in a small but elegant home. We sat in their living room. One wall was lined with huge windows; bright sunlight rushed in and we had a view of a dense group of aspen trees that they had planted. I spent most of my time talking to the woman; let's call her Anne. The man would spend a few minutes sitting with us, then go out into the garage to work on his car for a while, then come and sit down again, then go back to the garage. While he was out there, Anne told me that it helped him envision a future if he spent his time slowly getting an old car they owned into perfect shape, and the car was going to be a long project. I'm not a medical person and I didn't ask her much at all about their medical conditions; all I knew was what their pastor had quickly told me. Anne had a number of concerns. First, neither of them was in good enough shape to be

driving, but both of them had frequent medical appointments far from their home. Second, their doctors' visits, medicines, medical procedures, pain, disabilities, insurance claims, and most of all, medical bills, had taken over their lives. She spent countless hours online researching their conditions. Their normal lives had been completely overrun by their medical journeys.

Let's look at our first quote for today: *"A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ⁴⁴ A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thornbushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. ⁴⁵ A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart."* Most of us are familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, from the Gospel of Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivers the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer, and discusses the basic beliefs of Christian discipleship. Our quote, from Luke, contains about a third of the material that is included in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but in Luke, Jesus has come down from the mountain before giving his sermon, and thus it is often called the Sermon on the Plain. In our passage, Jesus is teaching a lesson by using a fruit tree as a metaphor for a person. A good tree bears good fruit and bad tree, like a bad person, produces bad fruit. The nature of a person

explains what it is that they do and say in life. The last line of our passage is particularly insightful: *What you say flows from what is in your heart*. People during Jesus' day didn't distinguish between the brain and the heart like we do, and while we informally talk about one's heart as being the emotional side of the mind, people of the day had a very literal view of one's heart: it was the center of both one's feelings and one's thoughts. It was the unified home of our sensitivities and our minds – and was where the Holy Spirit took up residency.

I'd like to get back to the couple I met with. I don't happen to be a medical professional. So, I certainly didn't try to give Anne any advice on their medical conditions or treatments. I offered to help them find rides from people in their church, which I later did – and I found that the people in their congregation were quite happy to set up a ride schedule, as well as deliver regular meals to the couple. I asked her about their daughter, and it took a little prodding, but I got her to start telling stories about all the fun things they did while the girl was growing up, and how until quite recently, they talked two or three times a week, and how her daughter still turned to her and her husband for advice, and how their conversations often turned to laughter. I said that it sounded like the three of them were very close – and maybe she should call her daughter up and have a frank conversation about their illnesses. I don't know if she ever made that call.

Our talk strayed far from practical issues. Anne told me that her mother had taught her how to quilt when she was young, and back then, Anne had found it tedious and had only done it to make her mother happy. But now, her mother was dead, and Anne couldn't get around that well anymore, and so she had started doing some quilting. She went to her room and brought out a blanket she had made – it was beautiful, and I told her so. She beamed. Anne talked about her mother, and how in many ways, the things Anne had done with her daughter were so very different than the things Anne had done with her mother – but also, how very similar they were. Her husband came into the room with engine sludge all over his hands, explaining that the battery seemed to be dead, even though it was less than a year old. I asked him if the battery terminals needed cleaning. He nodded and went out to check that. I talked to his wife about the aspen in the back yard, which they had planted together when they were a very young couple, and then her husband came back and reported that yep, it was the terminals.

Let's look at this sentence again: *What you say flows from what is in your heart.* This says that what we say flows from our minds and our emotions. It says that we can't help but say what we think and what we feel. Our words expose what is truly within us. If the Holy Spirit has acted within us, if we have embraced what it means to accept God, then what comes out of the heart is pure and good.

This is a common theme in the New Testament, that the best evidence of the true presence of the Holy Spirit within an individual is what we say, what words come out of our mouths. The Holy Spirit has a fundamental impact on who we are as believing people. The Holy Spirit doesn't just have some fuzzy influence on our hearts. It makes us what we are - and we cannot hide what's in there.

Let's look at the second Bible passage for today. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: *For, "Who can know the LORD's thoughts? Who knows enough to teach him?" But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ.* In this part of the letter, Paul is telling the members of the church in Corinth that they should trust God's wisdom, not the wisdom of people. His overall concern is managing divisions that have arisen among the members of this church, and his focus is on spirituality and beliefs, on what is in the hearts of people. He wants them to understand that it is God that should speak through them, not society. They are to echo the grace brought by the Holy Spirit, not the material, worldly demands of people. He is quoting Isaiah 40:13 when he says *Who can know the LORD's thoughts? Who knows enough to teach him?* He's saying that God's ways, God's thoughts, what is in the heart of God, can be very mysterious to us, and that we need to trust God to know and to do what's right. He's saying that if we listen to God, if we accept the power of the Holy Spirit, then

we can solve one of the great mysteries of faith, and this is how to ensure that we have pure hearts. There are many things that we can't understand, but we have an amazing power: we can reflect what is in the heart of God.

So, getting back to this couple I visited with, I was a not-so-young intern at a fairly large United Methodist church, and when I had been there for an hour or so, and our conversation was winding down, Anne asked me to pray with them. I of course said that I would be quite happy to do so. I went into the garage and fetched her husband. The three of us sat down, with me facing them, and I took their hands in mine. I offered a praying of healing, of a release from the fear of sickness, and release from the fear of an unknown future. I asked God to take the struggles they were going through and use them as a tool to greatly enhance the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and minds. Then the husband scooted back to the garage, to work on the car some more. It was very important for him to stay busy, to stay distracted, while his wife was more reflective. In truth, Anne was more able than her husband to stare directly into the face of fear.

As I stood to leave, Anne thanked me for my visit. Then she said something very sweet to me. She said that it was so nice to talk to me because I didn't have medicine in my mind or in my heart. She really did use those words. She said that with all the medical visits, with all the phone calls with insurance companies,

she had been overwhelmed with medical this and medical that. She said it was nice to just talk for a while. She said that the doctors were kind, but they were too busy being doctors and conveying medical things to her. She came very close to saying that I hadn't actually done a single truly practical thing for them – which was perfectly fine with me. That's because I was doing my job, and that was to just be present for them. That's it. Being there for someone is a totally unskilled job. You don't need to know a thing. All that matters is what is in your biblical heart, what you feel and what you know, and yes, sometimes, it's best not to know too much. It's better to have a heart and mind that's empty of everything but the Holy Spirit. Any of us can help someone in this way. Please pray with me.

God, let the inspiration of the Holy Spirit flow from our hearts, let your thoughts flow from our hearts, let the lessons of Jesus Christ flow from our hearts. When we are in the presence of someone in need, help us recognize their needs. Help us be calm and present. Rather than trying to solve problems all the time, let us understand that you created us to need each other. It is your wish that we lift each other up. Guide us so that we can help heal the hearts of those around us. And God, thank you for the blessings we receive when we are there for another human. For we know that the greatest reward is when your grace is reflected back to us by someone whom we have served. Amen.