

Hinton Rural Life Center
Celebrating 60: Embracing Our Roots & Sharing the Fruits

Reflections . . .

February 20, 2021



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Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

-- Matthew 10:1-5, NRSV

In the house where we used to live, from our bedroom window, we had a sight that brought me joy.

We could see a peach tree, a tree belonging to our daughter, having been a birthday present. Each year, I knew that spring had arrived when I saw dozens of pink blossoms decorating its branches. Every flower served as the site of a small promise, a site where blossom exchanged with golden, sweet fruit. As the summer stretched towards autumn, we regularly went outside, stood under our tree, and counted the peaches hanging from its branches, delighting in the implied pledges of pie and ice cream and snacks.

Those peaches did not just carry in them something good to eat. While they did offer the hope of a snack, those peaches also carried much more with them. They carried with them a summer's worth of rain and sun, rich nutrients, and countless encounters with pollen-happy bees. They carried with them knowledge, the knowledge we gained as a family as we learned to care and tend to our tree. They carried with them joy, the joy we shared as parents with a child who gleefully counted the blossoms and named the treats the fruit would make. They carried with them new connections, connections that we would make with yet-to-be-known friends and neighbors who would certainly share in a belly-warming cobbler sometime next autumn. They carried with them love, the ripening love from a friend to our child as a reminder that someone cared for us.

Those little blossoms represented so much more than simply the site of a season's fruit. Those blossoms represented the efficiency of nature, the joy of eating, and the fruit of relationships had and to be had. They represented more than just themselves. They represented those who planted the tree, cultivated it, sold it, transported it, bought it, and replanted it. The fruit represents seemingly endless imaginings of who touched our tree in the past and whom its fruit would connect us to in the future.

Often, it appears that what looks rather simple at first glance is much more complicated, more intricate than initially assumed. A similar observation made of our peach tree may be made of Jesus' sending of the disciples in Matthew's gospel.

In this section of chapter ten in Matthew's gospel, the gospel writer returns to an earlier theme: the command to send the disciples in Jesus' name. This "bookending" with this repeated emphasis underlines the importance of the disciples' being sent. Not to be lost in this repeated emphasis is the reminder that when they go, the disciples do not travel alone. They take with them Christ, himself.

The disciples carry with them the plans of a kingdom, the hopes of a redefined world, the promises of new life. Yet, more than these three, the disciples carry with them the presence of Jesus and, in turn, a direct connection to God, the Creator of all things. It is this representative role that is so profound in the work and role of the disciples.

Here, Jesus reminds the disciples that the presence that they offer is not just simply their own, but that within them they carry the very essence of the kingdom, of Jesus, and, therefore, of God. The disciples do not stand on their own. They stand with and on behalf of many.

At times, such a corporate nature might serve as a great gift to the disciples, supporting and buoying them when the road they travel gets lonely. Discipleship can feel isolating. Remembering that others and God stand with them will take them that one step farther when additional steps seem too difficult to take. At other times, disciples need to remember that their actions do not just represent themselves but an entire community of people who have gone before, who currently witness to the same faith, and who are yet to come. Even more, disciples must be reminded that they stand in for God, embodying the divine presence to the world in real and imagined ways.

In my years volunteering and serving through Hinton, I can almost hear the echoes of disciples who have come before—their conversations while walking these same hills, giggles while splashing in these same waters, and prayers while said through these same tears. In the ramps built throughout the community, in the churches trained around the region, in the lives renewed while overlooking a mountain lake, I hear and see the impressions they have left in people, in the community, and far beyond this valley. I am reminded that what was theirs has become mine, has become ours, and will become yours. It is an inheritance of discipleship that we do not possess ourselves, but an inheritance jointly owned and entrusted by the past with the promise of tomorrow.

We represent to the world how this place on Hinton Hill tells a unique part of the kingdom story, a story told with a distinct accent and vocabulary all its own. When the gospel says faith, at Hinton we know that is just another word for new shingles. When the gospel says hope, we know that is just another word for cords of firewood. When the gospel says love, we know that is just another word for rocking chairs, soaring eagles, and community meals. At Hinton, we know the words we speak, the lives we live, the kingdom we share, and the grace we extend is not our own but passed on to us so that we might embody it for someone else. We stand in this place as representatives, proxies for God's kingdom and as inheritors of Hinton's story.

Such a representative role may prove enlivening and encouraging, yet burdensome and daunting. However, like our peach tree carrying new blooms each spring, in the disciple's representative role, while much is carried, much more is promised. Each carrier of the gospel bears the possibilities of the kingdom, a kingdom of transformative and life-altering love, a kingdom of justice and peace, a kingdom of common care and individual worth, a kingdom of tomorrow's hopes sprouting in the promises of today.

A harvest of transformative love, peace, care, and hope . . . that sounds like rather good fruit to me, fruit worth waiting for and working to cultivate.

Keep representing, keep working, keep planting, keep being Hinton on this hill, in this community, in your communities, and into the world.

Amen and Amen.



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