Getting back to our roots:

or our Spiritual Formation from the roots on up…

To be a tree - "A tree is more than its fruit; we must cultivate our whole selves from the roots up." - Thomas Merton

On the whole, we are "fruit pickers." We look for the results of our labor. Products, statistics, jobs are checked off the list. We point to the fruit as a measure of our successes – the juicier the better, the bigger the better, good healthy color, bountiful harvest and plenty of it! I speak, of course, not of an actual fruit harvest but the evaluation of spiritual growth; our own spiritual measure and the spiritual growth of those we mentor, surrounding us in ministry. We seem to be migrant workers busy primarily with gathering up the 'produce' and paying little attention to the process that is necessary to continually make the harvest righteous and good. It is not just focusing on the fruit (an end product) but of the unending process of growing spiritually, never stopping in the development of Christ likeness.

So is this notion of fruit such a bad thing? After all, Christ said in His Sermon on the Mount, "by their fruit you will recognize them." (Matthew 7:20) And then Paul writes, "we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1:10) We **report** on our fruit in many aspects of our lives: pointing to success in our jobs with promotions and accolades, the outcome of children's accomplishments, their status and the endless comparison of their successes with relatives and friends. We tend to define all people by their fruit – identity is all wrapped up in the fruitfulness of our efforts in life and we are judged by others with our apparent harvest.

Sometimes the fruit is from a 'good year.' All the conditions were right and everything fell into place for us – life was good. But since that time, the soil of our heart has been left dormant, the ground left untilled, the seed was not replanted and the watering was sporadic or non-existent. It is then we see the fruit begin to shrivel. The neglect underneath has finally taken its toll on the exposed visage.

It is a wake-up call to God's people.

Anne Graham Lotz writes about the horrific, out of control acts of violence in society today: a father killing and dismembering his handicapped daughter, a son who shoots his father, pimps who sell young children for the perverted sexual pleasure of others, the poor enslaved by the greed of others, no respect for human life and that seems to go undetected, below the surface of our conscious awareness. Recent statistics show that 41% of all pregnancies in New York City end in abortion. All this abomination cries out for justice.

But Anne continues citing Paul's warning that "the church will have a "<u>form</u> of godliness," which would include traditions, rituals, denominationalism, hymns, prayers, ceremonies, homilies, sermons and materials but would deny the power of the Cross of Jesus Christ to save and transform lives. Instead, the church would look to government programs, business practices, organizational structure, the arts, psychological counseling and other means to answer life's questions and needs. How many churches fit into this category." (<u>Expecting to See Jesus</u>) If our culture is on the brink of spiritual bankruptcy, could it be the church is resting as dormant soil?

It is here we stop and take the assessment of James, "is any one of you in trouble? He should pray." (James 5:13) This is living in His felt presence and it is always the place to start – and

start again. It may seem obvious to you, the reader, but you would be surprised how long it takes for some to start here again with that closet time alone with God, reconnecting with the discipline and communion of prayer.

And because the fruit has been a long time coming, it will take time to cultivate the underground conditions, the things not immediately seen to grow the healthy produce of a fruitful life. Be patient in the pruning – "life" may not come right after the cutting. It takes time to re-direct growth. Similarly, the germinating seed **dies first** only then to live, spouting a root system which still develops slowly under the surface.

Examples in creation help us to visualize.

The Utah Juniper tree, indigenous to the Arches National Park in the western United States, demonstrates unique survival methods as it grows in the desert terrain. Its twisting, often-dead branches seem to epitomize the struggle of life with little water. When moisture is scarce, a juniper will actually stop the flow of fluids to some of the outer branches so that the rest of the tree has a chance to live – ***it sacrifices a part of itself in order for the rest of the tree to live.*** The tree survives because it knows to cut off sources of nourishment, sacrificing a limb that would otherwise kill the entire tree. Do we continue to feed parts of ourselves which impede greater spiritual growth or do these practices need to be cut away, stopping the perpetuation and hindering the growth we await with full nourishment?

Another condition of the root system is when the plant seeks other sources for growth.

Listen to Hosea. "When I found Israel it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on a fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved." (Hosea 9:10) In the beginning, during the stages of the early fruit, there was such promise. This is likened to the time when we first come to faith – we are getting fed, growing gradually and at a steady pace and then something changed in our regiment of care. In the case of the Israelites, though they began in righteousness (good growing conditions), they were enticed by the Moabites to change their hearts and they worshiped Baal at the mountain called Peor. Their results? Their fruit was ruined. They took on the characteristics of what or whom they loved and they became as corrupt as the gods they worshiped.

You say, "Certainly, you don't mean that we have bowed down to other idols? That's archaic!"

Look deeper. Do we really take a hard look at what we are becoming? It is a daily assessment. Have other gods crept into our lives, feeding us false nutrients and stunning the growth we would have otherwise enjoyed in Christ? Dangled in front of us, has our achieved success taken on the form of personal positioning, power? Are we guilty of seeking position for the purpose of being heard? Do we desire ***more*** to be people of great influence because of our skills and popularity? Do we gravitate to people who have power so that they can help our agenda along? Do we see that this kind of fruit is potentially a bad planting? Identify the slippery slopes – they can be very persuasive but poisonous – subtle but sinister.

Picking figs from thorn bushes?

Returning to Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:43-45), "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briers. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow from his heart his mouth speaks."

The heart is our root system. When we are pressed to show what is really inside the growing process, our mouths will betray us. In both Hebrew and Greek, the heart is considered the center of the body's essential functions: physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual. The heart is seen as the dwelling place of the Spirit, pushing out our natural and carnal responses (2 Cor. 1:22, Eph. 3:17). Don't miss that point! Jesus' warning here was that a person's actions flowed out of inner attitudes and choices, whether these were good or evil. The fact is we won't know what lays hidden below the surface until the fruit of our lips belies the condition of our heart, the soil where the roots grow. And remember, the Spirit knows your inner 'groans,' the real language of your heart – not just the 'washed language' of political correctness or polite courtesies.

When we hear from our own lips those words belying evil attitudes, do we deal with it? Do we allow society to re-direct our source of nourishment saying, "this is just the way things are and nothing can be done about changing it" – go with the flow – propagate new complex, false root systems that reflect the world, roots of entanglement rather than **straight** nourishment from the Living water, the Truthful Vine? It brings new meaning to Isaiah's straight words of prophecy to us today, "Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." (40:3) - (Also, Psalm 27:11, 107:7, Prov. 3:6, 4:11, Matthew 3:3, 2 Peter 2:15)

Jesus warns again, "There are plants that my Father in heaven has not planted, they will be pulled out by their roots." (Matthew 15:13) He will not just pick off the bad fruit but will go to the source of any lie that tries to seed and grow – it will be pulled from underneath the surface. And if we lose sight of Who our source is and claim the 'fruit' for ourselves, be careful - remember – you do not support the root, the root supports you! (Romans 11:18)

The good news is to focus on the continual expanse of roots that grow and grow deep beneath the surface – roots spreading to the ever flowing stream of Living water, reaching deeper into the honesty and intimacy of God's Spirit.

I pray the words of Psalm 92 over you,

But the godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon.
For they are transplanted into the Lord's own house.
They flourish in the courts of God.
Even in old age will they still produce fruit.
They will remain vital and green.
They will declare the Lord is just.
He is my rock!
There is no evil in Him.
(New Living Translation)

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