

# SEEK THE WELFARE: TREES & FRUIT

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Scripture: Matthew 7:15-29. The scripture reading may be found at the end of the sermon.

This is a written transcription of the video message Adam Fronczek offered on Sunday, September 27, 2020. The full video can be found at [knox.org/sundayseptember227](https://knox.org/sundayseptember227).

**Opening Discussion: What is the crossroads you (or the church) are at in these days?** Feel free to address respond to this question speaking to a personal crossroads, a crossroads you perceive for Knox, or one you perceive for the broader church, especially in these days of pandemic.

SERMON:

We are living in a season in which racism appears in the news every day, with protests and political conventions, and luckily, grassroots conversations reminding us that the work of justice is not over. I haven't spoken about race in a sermon since back in July, but at that point your church's Session made a commitment that we would keep thinking about racial justice work and come back to you in September with more to talk about. That time is upon us.

Back in July, following nine listening sessions with members of our congregation, the Session approved a set of Guiding Principles that would govern our continued work on racial justice in the life of Knox Church. The Session asked its Racial Justice Task Force to share

those Guiding Principles with diverse friends of Knox who could help us turn the principles into concrete next steps. We talked to our good friends from Third Presbyterian in East Westwood. We also shared conversation with Paul Roberts, the President of the only historically black seminary in our denomination. We talked with Daniel Hughes, a Methodist pastor in Price Hill who is a key leader in racial justice ministries in our city. We talked with Denise Anderson, who leads the office of Racial and Intercultural Justice for the PCUSA. And we talked with Shavon Starling-Louis, a pastor and friend of Knox who was one of the few women of color to preach in our pulpit back in 2019.

Following those conversations, we brought some reflections back to the Session. That conversation took place this week. In the weeks to come, you'll get a full report on that work from the Session. Today, as we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, I'm going to provide some theological reflection on Jesus' closing words in that sermon. His words speak clearly to some of the themes we heard in those conversations I mentioned. I hope you will hear something hopeful in these reflections: While we are being challenged to stretch ourselves and grow as Christian people, this renewed emphasis on racial justice is consistent with our church's history. There are good intentions and faithful actions that have been a part of Knox Church for a long time, and we are now in a season that is ripe for us to take our next steps.

In Matthew 7, as Jesus brings his greatest sermon to a close, he uses a metaphor about building your house on a rock. Jesus says that when you want to do something meaningful, don't start with a foundation of sand that shifts and sinks and provides no support. Build it on a rock, where it can stand.

The rock upon which good racial justice work is founded...is relationships. Every one of our conversation partners talked about the importance of relationships as the foundation of racial justice work. It matters little, they said, if you make some grand financial gesture, if there is no relationship attached to it. Very rarely are people convinced to invest in racial justice work because of

something they hear on the news, read in a book, or because they are lectured to in a sermon. Change comes from sharing friendships with people who are different from us, and getting to know their lives, struggles, and stories. Building relationships with people whose lives have been different from our own is what leads to change.

The same wisdom applies to those in our congregation who may not be so sure about this new emphasis on racial justice. The Session cares about your perspective and wants you on this journey. It makes precious little difference to the welfare of our fractured communities if our church cannot have room for difference and tolerate disagreement. We have an obligation to be prophets in the face of injustice, and we have an obligation to respect the diversity of our congregation and to do this work together.

In the days to come, you can expect that racial justice ministries at Knox will emphasize relationship building. We'll be finding plenty of ways, from informal gatherings to more structured experiences, and from worship to service opportunities, to make our church a place where we can connect with people whose experiences are different from our own, so that we can grow in our understanding of the beautiful diversity of God's created world.

Another part of the Matthew passage that spoke to me was Jesus' comment in verse 21:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father..."*

In my Bible, above these verses, there is a heading; it says: "Concerning Self-Deception." Jesus was speaking truth to a group of people who wanted to be good. They thought they were good, and they probably weren't bad. They were trying to do the right things, but they hadn't thought much about what was at the root of Jesus' teaching. They hadn't really searched their hearts for the truth in what Jesus had to say.

Part of what we've been encouraged to do in our racial justice work is to talk about the truths hidden in our long-standing ministries. We do faithful work with homeless families and children who are hungry. We've been invited to keep doing these things, and to dig deeper to look at the root problems beneath these needs.

If you're a volunteer with IHN, our homelessness ministry...if you've ever packed food bags for Childhood Food Solutions...have we ever challenged you to think about why most of the children and families served by these ministries are black or brown, while most of the more affluent volunteers are white? There must be a history here, an explanation about laws and policies that have benefitted white people at the expense of people of color. That's what we keep referring to as structural racism.

I know that some members of our church have been concerned that in our more recent focus on racial justice, we may crowd out our longstanding commitments to other mission partners: IHN, Childhood Food Solutions, a growing interest in the plight of immigrants and refugees. Will we forget or neglect these ministries? *The reality is quite the opposite: our new racial justice conversations do not need to compete with our existing ministries.* In many ways, we're just going to try to get more honest and explicit about why these ministries exist. We're going to keep building relationships with our mission partners and try to understand the lives of the people they serve. We're not going to be satisfied to provide band-aids in the face of ongoing disparities, but we're going to strive to understand the root causes of why they exist.

Jesus begins this last part of the Sermon on the Mount with a word about a tree and its fruit. "Every good tree bears good fruit," he says, "but the bad tree bears bad fruit." In another place, he uses the same metaphor, cursing a fig tree that does not produce any fruit (Luke 13:6-9). Here in Matthew 7, the metaphor is about false prophets. You should believe the words of someone whose life bears good fruit, but question someone who seems to say good things, but has no actions that follow the words.

Many of us can appreciate the frustration of a tree that produces no fruit. There are few things I love this time of year more than garden tomatoes. I eat them on everything; I'm especially fond of a tomato sandwich with a little salt and pepper and mayo on a slice of good bread—it's one of my favorite things. This summer I planted my own tomatoes a bit late. By the time the heat of August came about I had tall plants reaching up several feet, and the fruit was just coming out...and now, as the weather cools in September, I've got vines full of green tomatoes that aren't going to ripen. I go into the yard and see those bushes: all that work, all that abundance, all that show...no fruit.

In some of my more honest conversations with clergy friends who are people of color, I've been made aware that too often the white church has been a tree that produces no fruit when it comes to race. Can you imagine the frustration of being a person of color, invited over and over again to speak to mostly white congregations about racism? To find that they listen intently and ask good questions...and then nothing changes?

Many of us are keen to be the "good white people," so we say all of the right things and we desire to be included in diverse gatherings where people of color hear us make bold pronouncements about the evils of racism, only to disappear when it is time to act. Often our commitments of time and money and energy and do not follow our words. We walk away when it is time for commitment.

The chief outcome of the recent presentation to Session is that Knox will be creating a standing Racial Justice Ministry. It will be open to any member of our community who wishes to participate, to make sure that we make ongoing, significant commitments to racial justice. These commitments will become a part of the fabric of our congregation for the long term, with financial resources to support its work. The Session unanimously approved this.

You should not expect that race is going to become the subject of every sermon preached in this congregation. But you also shouldn't expect that I'm going to talk about it for the rest of this year and

then abandon it for some other subject next year. Bearing fruit in the area of racial justice is not work for a single growing season. It is a problem more than 400 years old in our country and it will take consistent commitment to make progress toward a better tomorrow. Beginning now, and over time, we pray we will be a tree that bears good fruit.

The good news, and one more repeated comment from our conversation partners, is that this work of racial justice should never become about shame. Nothing is accomplished by making white people feel bad that they are white. The truth is that there is a richness to God's creation that is found in the great variety in which God has created us. God made us with different colors and textures, cultures and traditions—made us to love one another...and we miss out on so much if we continue to separate ourselves from people who are different.

You can expect to hear more in the next several weeks about the report that was received by our Session and a formal invitation to join our new racial justice ministry, if you feel so called.

For now, I invite you into a time of discussion about Jesus' words to us in the Sermon on the Mount. What metaphor was most meaningful for you?

- Was it the encouragement to build your house on a rock? What's a relationship in your life that has been meaningful when it comes to thinking about racism or justice?
- Was it the caution against "Self-Deception?" How can we continue to have richer involvement in the mission commitments Knox has made for decades?
- Was it the metaphor of the tree and its fruit? Especially during this time of pandemic, its limitations of movement, and the way it is exacerbating disparities—how can we act in favor of justice in these times, and be a tree that produces good fruit?

Amen.

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## MATTHEW 7:15-29 (NRSV)

### A TREE AND ITS FRUIT

<sup>15</sup>“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup>You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup>A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>Thus you will know them by their fruits.

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### CONCERNING SELF-DECEPTION

<sup>21</sup>“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ <sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

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### HEARERS AND DOERS

<sup>24</sup>“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. <sup>25</sup>The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. <sup>26</sup>And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

<sup>28</sup>Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, <sup>29</sup>for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.