

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector Scripture: John 15:4-16

"Good Fruit"

My dear friends, I cannot even begin to tell you how glad I am to be here with you today. It has been an interesting few weeks - to be sure - and a time when I have had to really depend upon others. I am still limited in what I am allowed to do and to lift. I cannot lift anything heavier than a large cup of coffee. Just think of the things that that would exclude in your life! Limitations aside - I am making great progress toward healing and thank each of you for your kindness, shown in so many ways, and your prayers. I cannot even begin to express my thanks and gratitude for your love and caring.

My mind races back to the morning of June 11 at Kenmore Mercy Hospital, as I awaited the final preparation for my surgery. Deacon Reitz and Molly Sammarco had come to pray with us - and to provide some company for Marilyn, as she awaited the outcome of the surgery and news from the Neurosurgeon at its completion. Here I was lying in the bed of room 7, and in walked Fr. Ward. He wanted to make me comfortable, and did his very best to make me laugh - usually it is the other way around! He did such a good job that we had to be reminded by the pre-op staff to keep it down - as my companion team got all the more rowdy. What a send off! Michelle, the daughter of Bob and Carol Krieger, came out from the OR and told me it wouldn't be long - and that she would be in there with me. What a blessing - but that is just the beginning! The Neurosurgeon came to mark my neck and brief us, followed by a Dr. Kevin who wired me for sound and told me that his job would be to follow the impulses of my nerves as they worked around my spinal column. We could all tell that I was in good hands. Both Marilyn and I were about to witness an outpouring of love that is indescribable.

It is never easy to prepare for surgery - and I should know, having had so many over the years. I was blessed to have folks from St. Bart's who have experienced similar surgeries, Jim Sibbet, Susan Rieman, Joann Bush, Mark Di Maria, just to name a few, share their experience and how they did with their recoveries. You never really know what to expect in terms of rehab - or what they will find when they "open you up." It is really about putting your trust in the Lord, and letting Him handle the details. I knew about the brace - and that I would wear it for three weeks, and the limitations that would go along with the healing - but other than that I was entering a time where I was going to be dependent. Thanks be to God - what I would see, hear, and experience is the wonderful faithfulness of brothers and sisters in Christ, who would exhibit and shine the light and love of Jesus Christ - to me and to others. I would experience the vine, the branches, and the fruit!

Jesus said to His followers in John chapter 15: *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."* (John 15:4-5) Here I was witnessing the healing love of Jesus Christ, and the power of His love reaching out to me through the hands, the words, the prayers, and the actions of His branches - who thoughtfully and selflessly gave of themselves in so many ways. I am blessed to be experiencing the power of the Body of Christ, firsthand - and I stand here today - in grateful obedience - thanking you - for being His church - and bearing much fruit - GOOD FRUIT! (The Greek word καρπος *karpos* means benefit, harvest, and fruit.)

Believe me, at every turn I kept being shown case after case of His love flowing through others. I wasn't awake very long as I was being moved from the recovery room to my room. I

overheard Marilyn telling others that I was supposed to be in a different room, but that there was a woman already in that room – and so they just had to put me in a private room. Talk about a blessing! As I was getting situated in that room, Fr. Molison came in! He visited, prayed for me and anointed me – another real blessing. He would return the next day – to visit me and pray with me before I was released. His faithful friendship and pastoral care means a great deal to me – and I continue to be grateful. I found out that Deacon Ed called Marilyn from Florida to check in and see how I was doing the night of the surgery. He came to my home to visit me after he got back from visiting Dawn, Jamison, and his grandson Levi Elijah. Awesome indeed, my church family has not only been praying for me, but walking with me and my family. How blessed I am! How blessed we are!

I was in constant contact with Deacon Reitz, as we work so very well together, and he was my hands and feet, delivering the Parish Life and the Chatter to our dear secretaries on my behalf. We are very blessed to have him as a part of our life together. Our secretaries have been a source of constant prayer and encouragement to me and my family during this time, and I thank each one of them for their prayers, love, caring and attention.

Funny, but through this time of recovery I kept being drawn back to the Gospel of John and chapter 15; Jesus indeed is the vine, we are the branches, and God the Father is the vinedresser. As Fr. Ward has reminded us many times, nothing happens by chance, God has a purpose in all that we experience in our lives. Ironically, as one of the workers in the vineyard, I have gotten to experience the fruit of the branches, firsthand. I continue to receive beautiful cards, with prayerful wishes, and let me tell you, I am not exaggerating when I say that I have a pile of cards that is about a foot high! I have also received e-cards, musical cards, Facebook comments, emails, phone calls, visits, and more, even a large poster made by the Sunday School Children. Ironically, we received several huge baskets of fruit – a physical reminder to me from the Holy Spirit, of the outpouring of love - good fruit – from the wonderful people of this Godly church – and the love and care that they bear for each other. I am but one recipient of such fruit, who now has the unique opportunity to tell others about the faithfulness of this truly Christian community.

The day after my surgery, I was allowed to come home, and went upstairs to bed: me, my brace, and about four pillows – so that I could sleep sitting up. I was warned that I might experience some soreness in my throat, as when they made the incision from the front, they would have to move everything out of the way – to the side- so that they could get to the spinal column and replace the two discs. The extent of the arthritis that they found caused Dr. Stoffman to spend an extra hour, and four drill bits, to free the nerves from the calcifications on my spine. All of this extra work caused me to not only have a very sore throat, but affected my speech and my swallowing. The speech has improved greatly, but I might still have some issues with swallowing for a few months. This caused me to want to only talk for very small bits at a time. I received a phone call that awakened me and that Marilyn brought to me that day – from our Bishop Bill Atwood. He called our home to see how I was doing, and to pray for me over the phone. I told him of my difficulty speaking, and he graciously allowed me to listen, answering only in short phrases. What an awesome time, and an awesome example of pastoral leadership! We spent nearly 40 minutes talking and in prayer – what a blessing. Immediately following that call, Fr. Ward called too – for he had given the Bishop our phone number. His calls of encouragement and prayer, including a special personal visit on June 20, my birthday, mean so very much to me. I am indeed blessed to be a part of the ministry leadership of this Godly new province, this wonderful diocese, and this awesome congregation. God is glorified by all that you have done and continue to do for one another. Jesus reminded us of this later in that

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chapter of John's Gospel when He said: "*My Father is glorified by this that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.*" (John 15:8)

I am sure that I have failed to mention something or someone. There are some very touching, personal stories of emails, cards, letters, and more, that mean so much to me – and that have touched my heart – that I am unable to share with you – but for which I am so very grateful. All of this is even more evidence of the good fruit being born by you. Even last Sunday, as I attended the 10 AM service, and then the meeting which followed – I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of love, and your consideration – for I am still a bit fragile and cannot hug folks just yet. It was good to be back and a part of the congregation – but I must admit, I was exhausted.

This past week brought a few more surprises, as I spoke with my dear friend, Fr. Mike Lonto from St. Mary's in Salamanca, who attended Trinity School for Ministry with me. He was at a reunion held every three years, in honor of our dear friend and colleague, The Rev. Dr. Les Fairfield. It began on June 11, the day I had surgery, and even though I was unable to attend, Fr. Mike led that group in prayer for my surgery and recovery; more good fruit!

I am in awe of the mighty works that Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ has done and continues to do through each one of you. We are indeed blessed to be a part of this family, this Christian Community that not only follows the Great Commission, but indeed is a shining example of the Great Commandment. Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was. His response can be read in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels. Let me share with you His words taken from the Gospel of Mark 12:29-33; Jesus said to them "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.' The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE'S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

This weekend, let us be thankful for the work of others, who have led the way so that we can worship freely, so that we can live in a land where we are free to bear fruit and speak freely of His love and His kindness. Let us be thankful that we are a part of a historic beginning of a new faith nation – the Anglican Church in North America, where we can continue to profess and stand on the Holy Word of God – and not be ridiculed. Let us be thankful and ask the Lord's blessing – that we would continue to bear Good Fruit – in His Name.

I want to leave you with these words of Jesus from John 15:16 which remind us of His love and Lordship: "*You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain.*" (John 15:16)