



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

FOREVER YOUNG

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COMMUNION MEDITATION

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;

¹³planted in the house of the LORD,

they will flourish in the courts of our God.

¹⁴They will still bear fruit in old age,

they will stay fresh and green,

¹⁵proclaiming, "The LORD is upright;

he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."

Psalm 92:12-15

Bob Dylan is one of the most popular and influential songwriters and singers of the past 50 years. You can't write the history of modern rock and pop music without Dylan at the center of it. His musical styles ranged from folk to country to acoustic pop and hard rock. He always pushed the limits, was always unpredictable, and never fit into a neat little box. Bob was born in the town of Hibbing, Minnesota in 1941 as Robert Zimmerman. He took the stage name Dylan from the Irish poet Dylan Thomas.

In 1973 he wrote and recorded a song entitled *Forever Young*. It was written after the birth of his son and expresses his fatherly love and desire for his child to grow up to have a great life. Bob Dylan was already showing signs and indications of his spiritual journey to faith, which would culminate a couple years later in his public announcement of his commitment to Christ. The song is like a prayer or benediction. It reflects the Old Testament blessings that the patriarchs would speak over their sons, and it echoes the great Priestly Benediction in the book of Numbers (6:24-26); there are many other biblical allusions and images

woven throughout it. The song has been recorded by a number of other artists, including Rod Stewart, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Joan Baez. Here is what Bob Dylan prayed for his young son:

*May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you
May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
And may you stay forever young*

It's a simple but hauntingly beautiful song. What Christian parent hasn't wished the same—spoken or unspoken—for their child or grandchild? But let's apply our analytical minds for a moment to this well-intentioned fatherly hope. It's admirable to wish that another person could remain "forever young." But it's impossible, a hopeless dream, a fruitless quest. Psychologists speak of a "Peter Pan Syndrome": a pathology or psychic maladjustment where a man or woman refuses to grow up and remains immature far into adulthood. That is not a worthy goal. And it's pointless, because every one of us experiences the relentless process of growing older. Nothing is more pathetic than an adult trying to act like they're still a kid.

Our society—no surprise to any of you, I'm sure—has become a Cult of Youth Worship. People try desperately to look younger, to feel younger, to defy age. Certainly in our generations the old assumptions about how a person is to look and feel and act at certain milestone ages are being re-written, because of our amazing advances in health care and our focus on healthy lifestyles. But while living fully and vibrantly at every age is a good thing, trying to stay "forever young" is a quest that is doomed to fail.

This morning I want to revise the Bob Dylan lyrics slightly, making them more biblical. What I will suggest to you is a goal that is not only worthy and aspirational but **attainable**. If you hope to remain "forever

young” you are going to be disappointed. It can’t happen. But we can retitle the song in this way: **Forever Fruitful**. And that is something we really can do. It’s what the writer of Psalm 92 lifts up for us: “The righteous (that is, those who have a relationship with the Lord and remain attached to Him) will flourish like a palm tree; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green” (Psalm 92:12-14). What is the realistic and appealing hope offered to believers? That although we can’t stay “forever young” and will inevitably approach old age, yet we can still “bear fruit.”

The imagery in the mind of the biblical writer is a date palm—one of the few trees native to the Holy Land—that continues to bear succulent fruits for its entire life. Now, I am not the world’s expert in date palms. I’ve done a little research on them, and according to one source a single tree in Israel can produce up to 600 pounds of fruit each growing season. The trees thrive in the climate and soil of that part of the world. But there is one interesting insight into the significance of Psalm 92 that I am sharing with you on pure second-hand recollection. A gifted Bible scholar named Ken Bailey, now deceased, lived for much of his life as a missionary and teacher in Israel and Lebanon, and knew intimately the geography and customs of the Middle East (including the flora and fauna). I heard Ken speak once about this very psalm (his American home base happened to be my hometown in Pennsylvania, and he would regularly preach at our church when he was in the States). Though I haven’t been able to confirm this in print anywhere, here is my recollection. Ken told us that when Middle Eastern date palms get old, they produce less fruit—but the fruit is sweeter. Markets would charge more for “old dates” than for “young dates” because of their flavor. For some botanical reason, as it ages that species of palm tree shifts its efforts in fruit-production from **quantity** to **quality**. Thus, the palm tree stood for many biblical generations as a symbol that the later years can be the **best** years. And so, when people read or sang Psalm 92, with its promise that believers will be like palm trees that “still bear fruit in old age,” they understood this to be true.

Here is the meaning for us. A follower of Jesus is a person who is intended to “bear fruit” in his or her life. We exist for a purpose. And the kind of fruit our Lord intends to produce, in and through us, will vary

depending on our age, our place in life, the particular way He has made us and where He has placed us. When we are in our teens and twenties, young Christians are to concentrate on bearing the fruit of learning and maturing, growing in their education and career skills, forming healthy relationships and developing a strong character. In later stages, bearing fruit may mean producing and raising a family, building a career, impacting others, and deepening their church life. In the retirement years the fruit may look different than it did decades earlier, but it is every bit as pleasing to God—and perhaps even sweeter: giving back generously of one’s time and accumulated treasure, passing on to the next generations, deepening personal knowledge of the Bible or experience in prayer. Your life and mine will look different when we are young than when we are old, but we can bear appropriate fruit in each season of life.

If you make it your goal to be “forever young,” you will fail—and if youth is all you value, it will disappoint you in the end. But if you make it your goal to be “forever fruitful,” then you will be fulfilled and rewarded. And in each season of life God will show you how He wants you to bear fruit for Him.

This concept of fruit-bearing is not only found in Psalm 92; it is deeply embedded in the New Testament, in the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul. Over the next two Sundays we will further explore this biblical concept of bearing fruit, and what it can mean for each of us.

Today we have the privilege of culminating our worship by experiencing Holy Communion with the two great symbols given to us by Jesus. He offers to us the fruit of the fields and the fruit of the vineyards. These are symbols not only of the fruit He wants to bring forth in us, but also of the process He followed in order to bless us in this way. The fruit of the field and the fruit of the vine both have to be crushed in order to become our sacraments. The grain must first be ground and then baked in a hot oven to become life-giving bread. The grapes must first be stomped or pressed to yield their sweet flavor to us.

In the same way, this sacred meal reminds us of how Jesus was crushed for us. He endured death on the cross, that we might receive His life. As we partake, remember what He has done for you. And offer yourself to Him, to bear fruit to His glory. ■