

Homily based on the readings from September 16, 2023 (1 Timothy 1.15-17; Luke 6.43-49)

“Every tree is known by its fruit.” In a sense, Jesus is telling us not to overthink things. People who are good will do good things and people who are evil will do evil things. I am reminded of Duke Ellington’s advice about judging the quality of a piece of music: “If it *sounds* good, it *is* good.” There is no need to develop a complicated theoretical framework – either for music or morality. Although we still need to rely on our eyes, our ears, and our minds, there is no great intellectual puzzle to be worked out. People will act according to their nature. We just need to pay attention.

The first aspect of this teaching is Christ’s statement that “[a] good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good.” On an individual level, the most prominent examples of this principle are the saints of the Church. Every single one of them, in his or her own particular way, exemplified an astonishing degree of personal sanctity.

Whether they engaged in extraordinary lives of service – like Saint Teresa of Calcutta – or incredible acts of self-sacrifice – like Saint Maximilian Kolbe – or unbelievable acts of forgiveness – like Saint Maria Goretti – their fruit is not difficult to identify. Their deep and abiding connection with Jesus Christ blossomed and grew in ways that are obvious to anyone who is willing to look.

Today we celebrate the memorial of two great saints: Saint Cornelius and Saint Cyprian. Both were bishops during the middle of the third century – Cornelius in Rome and Cyprian in Carthage. Both suffered persecution – and ultimately martyrdom – under the pagan emperors of Rome. Were these good men, were they godly men? Absolutely. We are extremely fortunate that many of their written works – particularly those of Saint Cyprian – still survive, but their lives and their deaths provided the clearest possible testimony to the faith of Jesus Christ.

Of course, there is another aspect to this teaching that also requires our attention: “an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil.” Although

we could apply this principle to others, it is often more constructive to apply it to ourselves – either individually or collectively. If our own lives are not yielding good fruit, then we need to take a hard look at ourselves and what we are doing. On a broader level, if we see our church community – locally, nationally, globally – mired in corruption and scandal, or even just drifting toward apathy and malaise, then we know that everything is not all right.

In these cases, there is no solution but to return to the source of all goodness: to Christ himself – the firm foundation, the source of life and light. If we surrender ourselves to his goodness and mercy – if we humbly follow his teachings and partake in his holy sacraments – he will show us the way, he will lead us back to righteousness and truth. Christ gives us both the ability to choose what kind of fruit we will bear and the knowledge on which to base that decision. If we choose poorly, we have only ourselves to blame.