

Bearing fruitful faith and freethought



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Over several days we observed a black bear climbing a fruit tree across from our house. The bear didn't seem too concerned about us, standing a short distance away to watch, or the cars and trucks passing close by. The branches didn't seem strong enough to bear the bear, and we heard several cracking sounds, but the feast was never interrupted. Eventually, the fruit-snacker carefully backed down the trunk and waddled away satisfied, and so were we.

After watching this furry picnicker, I reflected on those who pick and gather spiritual teachings. My mind ambled back to ancient cautions regarding fruit produced by the faithful. I wonder whether they bear up under the watchful eye of reason.

Jesus of Nazareth left behind some critical warnings about those who attempt to sell bad fruit. "You will know them by their fruits" I invite you to read Matthew chapter 7. "Do not judge"; don't be a hypocrite; "Beware of false prophets"; listen and act on these words; and just because someone says "Lord, Lord" (as if piously familiar with their Bud Jesus) or performs amazing things (prophesy!; casting out demons!), Jesus will say to them: "I never knew you." He could see right through the masks of religion, the screens of spirituality. He seemed to be a good model for calling out the hyper-religious hypocrisy and self-righteousness of his time, and ours.

How do we pull back the curtain on these folks?

"You will know them." But will we, do we? It isn't necessarily disrespectful to sincerely question someone's faith, or shine a spotlight on showy spirituality. How do we identify authentic faith from false or fake? Strange to say, Jesus said there was such a thing as Fake Faith. Even some of the miracle-workers are making it all up (no surprise to skeptics who expose the superstitious tricks).

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes: "The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." I memorized this in youth, finding the list much more encouraging than commands and demands to prove true faith. Consider people of faith you see and hear. Do they "bear fruit" like this? Are they fine examples of these nine virtues of character? Or, are they pushy and preachy, quick to judge others according to correct beliefs, acceptable lifestyles, if they "believe the Bible," go to church or subscribe to orthodox theological notions? Beware those who talk a lot about their "faith in Jesus" but have little concern for the "fruits of faith." Read over that list a few times, then look in the mirror. By the way, they may be called fruits "of the Spirit," but clearly a person doesn't need to be a Christian to exhibit those fundamental qualities of a thoughtful life.

While studying the New Testament scriptures in Greek, I took a close look at the statement: *pan dendron agathon, karpous kalous poiei* — "Every good tree bears good fruit." (Matthew 7:17). A simple observation that bears its own fruit, if we pay attention to it. What's the result, or even the flavor of a person's practice of faith? Can we tell by seeing the "produce," by tasting to see if it's fresh or spoiled, edible or not? In other words, is the world a better, healthier, more nutritious place,

because of a person's way of living and believing? Do others benefit from the fruity crop? Keep in mind, the Teacher of Nazareth is specifically speaking of religious leaders, the "holy" ones, those who proudly proclaim how close to God they are, confident they know "God's Word" and "the mind of God." Beware! Watch out! Be alert and awake! An important alarm for his day and ours.

In the legendary garden of Genesis, trees produced fruit, but some fruit was dangerous and deadly. The first humans were told: "Do not eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge." Apparently God loves to give pass/fail tests, though the master Gardener must have known his innocent and hungry children couldn't resist the plump, ripe fruit. As he feared, they learned something valuable: obedience isn't always fruitful; it may be worth the risk to take responsibility for personal decisions. Of course, they lost their garden home because of that decision, but they gained independence of mind and the freedom that makes humans human. They had to use newfound knowledge to grow fruit elsewhere. Perhaps the Creator learned something too?

We can harvest those fruits today. Particularly the fruit of wisdom and discernment to choose what and whom to believe. It's fairly easy to pick out those who are honest and genuine. It may take serious freethinking to gain a higher view, like a bear in a fruit tree.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).