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## Good Fruit

Luke 6:43-45

**A Sermon preached at the Funeral of Zach Ladd in Duke University Chapel on May 24, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells**

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Today is the most terrifying day in many of our lives. To face death is sobering, even horrifying, for most of us. To face a sudden death, with no proper way to say goodbye, no parting words, no sense of peace and understanding, is an ending we rightly fear. But to face sudden death at the age of 23, with your life before you and an ocean of friends wishing you well and so much to live for and the glory of God alive in you: that is against nature, against everything we know to be right, and hope to be true. It doesn't get worse than that.

The deepest things we share today will be the grace of silence, when we know there's nothing to say; the gentleness of touch, when it's good to feel that one another are there; and the simple, sympathetic word, that says "I'm sorry," or "I'll never forget him." But I want to try to find words this morning to reach into this silence, to touch what's so hard to touch, to say what's so hard to say. I want to talk about what Zach's life shows us about God.

The heart of our anger and dismay and bewilderment today is that it seems such a waste – such a terrible waste. Most people get a whole story of life to map out and contemplate, but Zach's life was cut off, abruptly ended, the map now torn in shreds. And so immediately we think of what he never got a chance to do, to experience, to share, to enjoy. But I want to speak for a moment not about what Zach wasn't, but about what he was.

I believe for most of us there's a profound struggle going on between what we do and who we are. For so many people around Zach's age, life is largely about the accumulation of accomplishments – about proving to enough people that they've done worthwhile or amazing things. The point is to make yourself someone who can be admired. Having a bulging resumé is about being able to convince a stranger that you're a valuable person. But life isn't basically about impressing strangers. Sometimes all this assembling of achievements is about running away from the reality of who you are. In the end, life isn't about how many things you do – it's about who you are. Zach knew that. Zach died at 23. He didn't get a chance to do many things. We grieve that today. But in the end that's not what really matters. What matters is not admiring what he did but loving who he was. Zach didn't want to be admired. He wanted to be loved. He got that one right.

But at the same time there's another struggle going on for most of us. It's a struggle between what we achieve and what we show. Again, part of why we grieve today is that Zach didn't get the chance to achieve in life as much as we believed he would. But the truth is life isn't fundamentally about what we achieve. It's about what we show. The question is, what did Zach show that we couldn't have seen in the same way without him? And you know the answers. We couldn't have seen how precious is the joy and play of a child. We couldn't have seen how glorious is the life and the diversity of the animal world. We couldn't have seen how perfectly nature and grace combine in the heart of a true farmer. We couldn't have seen how disabled adults and children reveal the way we are all disabled, and, by finding abilities they never knew they had, reach parts of all of our souls we never knew we had. Zach showed us these things. What we achieve in life fades away. It will be surpassed, or replaced, or forgotten. But what we show in life is our glory.

Because what life is fundamentally about is this. It's about becoming so transparent that people can see through us and come face to face with God. That doesn't mean being perfect. If we were perfect, people would see us and not God. Zach showed us God through his wonders but also through his fragility, his fears, and his failures.

In the passage that Halston just read from Luke chapter 6, Jesus says, "No good tree bears bad fruit. ... Each tree is known by its fruits." Jesus lived a life so transparent that in him we see God face to face. He hung on what we call a good tree, the good tree we call the cross. And the fruits of that good tree are forgiveness and

eternal life, the healing of our past and the gift of our future. This is what Jesus achieved. Our role in life isn't to achieve it. Jesus has done that. Our role is to show it.

Zach's life wasn't a waste. Sure, he didn't do all the things many people live to do. Sure, he didn't achieve all the things we might have thought he would live to achieve. But life isn't about what we do and achieve. It's about what we are and what we show. Zach was a beautiful child of God, a person who loved people, loved people whose life was a struggle, loved animals, loved the created world. What Zach showed was the transparent gift of new life in Christ, the wonder of creation, the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Zach showed us who God is and what God has done. That was his glory. It doesn't get better than that.