Trump's rotten fruit and my own

Luther said we can judge a tree by its fruit. He never said doing so would be easy.

by Elizabeth Palmer

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When he heard that David Brody and Scott Lamb were writing a book called *The Faith of Donald J. Trump*, Eric Metaxas explains in his foreword to the book, “I really was tempted to giggle.” He expected a political gag book that contains “nothing but blank pages. Ha ha ha. Don’t forget to slap your knee.”

Like many Christians, Metaxas endorsed Trump as a candidate and has continued to support him in his presidency, even while critiquing his behavior and rhetoric on moral grounds. In his farcical article “A Few More #TrumpBible Verses,” Metaxas imagines Trump tweeting interpretations of scripture: “A good wife, who can find? I found three. #TrumpBible.” “A prophet is not without honor except in his home

town. But I was born in Queens, so who cares? #TrumpBible."

It's easy for Metaxas to laugh, and satire can function as a powerful form of social critique. But I'm fairly certain that the asylum-seeking parents whose children are taken from them at the border aren't laughing about Trump's foibles. I'm guessing the women he's groped, forcibly kissed, ogled, or publicly demeaned aren't laughing either. Nor are the openly transgender members of the military whose future is jeopardized, the traveling Muslim Americans who weren't allowed back in their country last January, or the black Americans who see white supremacist violence taking on new forms.

Metaxas is aware that he's treading on fraught territory when he jokes about Trump. He ends the foreword by invoking Martin Luther's theology: grace can't be earned by doing good works, nor can faith in God be measured by moral behavior. Those who look at Trump's behavior and decide that he's not a Christian, Metaxas concludes, are confusing faith with works. They err by making God into a moralistic taskmaster.

I take Metaxas's point to heart. Who am I to say whether Trump is a Christian? I've known plenty of parishioners, church council members, seminary and divinity school professors, and pastors who have deep faith in God through Christ—and who commit adultery and lie about it, abuse their children or spouse, buy the newest luxury car while ignoring the homeless person across the street, or accede to racism and misogyny in thousands of little ways, seen and unseen. I've never doubted that God still loves them.

But in *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther says that you can tell whether a tree is good or bad by its fruits. A good tree (that is, someone who has been justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ) will automatically bear fruits that are fragrant, delicious, and healthy. Paul calls them the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Luther is even more specific than Paul:

> From faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a cheerful, willing, free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbor voluntarily, without taking any account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. Its object is not to lay men under obligations, nor does it distinguish between friends and enemies, or look to gratitude or ingratitude, but most freely and willingly spends itself and its goods, whether it loses them

through ingratitude, or gains good will.

This is what the Christian life looks like when it's let loose in the world, sanctification made flesh.

But it's not that simple. We all bear some rotten fruit and some good fruit. The proportions of good to bad may differ from person to person, and some people's rotten fruit may be poisonous while other people's are only slightly rancid. Still, who am I to assess the fruits of the person next to me when my own branches are laden with rotten fruits, many of which I don't recognize?

Luther acknowledges that the walls of the true church are invisible since the depths of God's grace can't be measured or constrained by outward appearances. Appearances can be deceptive, blinded as we are by our own limited viewpoints. On the same tree where I see the bad fruits of misogynist rhetoric, environmental deregulation, and tax laws that benefit the rich, plenty of faithful Christians see what they regard as good fruits: saving unborn babies from abortion, stimulating the economy, and protecting American citizens from potential dangers. While we may all agree that some fruits look undeniably rotten—adultery, lying, and ruling by impulse—there are plenty of other fruits that are open to interpretation.

This is why I found myself announcing to a friend recently that I'm giving up judging Trump's faith. I believe in a God who *can* and *does* love Trump as much as I love my own children. This kind of love isn't simple: it weeps when the beloved strays, it gets angry when the beloved hurts others, and it works hard to draw the beloved toward ethical behavior. But even as it grieves the beloved's faults, it rejoices in the beloved's existence. I will never be able to love Trump in that way, so I'm grateful that God does. The least I can do in response is to pray.

But it's hard to pray for someone you don't love, and I still haven't figured out how to pray for Trump. I know that praying for him doesn't mean that I have to give up my political opinions, or to stop opposing hateful speech and unjust actions. It may even mean holding him to public accountability, as Christians do for each other. But it also means acknowledging that he and I have something in common: we both stand in need of God's grace.

When I shared my desire to pray for Trump with another Lutheran pastor, he suggested that I pray for the president to experience a Flannery O'Connor-like revelation. One that stoops into the depths of your wickedness, humbling and

hurting you as it turns you toward the slow, raggedy path of redemption.

That’s something I can pray for. Not only for Trump, but for myself.