

Even Rotten Fruit Looks Good In the Dark

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

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4th Sunday of Lent

Ephesians 5:8-14

“...Christ will shine on you”

He stood in front of the grocery produce section, leaning forward, looking carefully, scanning, staring, and peering at the selections before him. Oblivious to the college students careening their carts towards the beverage section, the worn out mother, pleading with her children to give her just a few more moments before they go to check out, and the elderly couple deciding between tuna helper and hamburger helper, Alan stood and stared at the selection before him. Peaches? Too soft. Grapes? Too many. Pears? Bad texture. Bananas? Just too weird. Apples? Yes, apples will do fine. Alan cut the shortest diagonal path to the bin full of apples, stood, and leaned over them. He looked at them, stared at them, as if he were looking through the apples to the floor. Minutes lasted an eternity, until slowly and gingerly Alan reached out and picked up one apple. He turned it over, inspecting every side, every aspect of the shiny, red-green fruit. He held it away from himself; his arm outstretched and then held it right up to the tip of his nose.

Aha, a brown spot! No good, this fruit is rotten!

Alan absently placed the rejected apple on the bottom, right hand side of the bin, and was already looking, scanning, trying to find that next apple to inspect – looking for his holy grail, the perfect apple without mark or blemish.

It was about six months ago when his wife died, and it was around that same time when he began his fastidious examination of fruit. When his wife died, he felt his world fall, melt, and dissolve around him. Nothing existed but the pain. Nothing was real but the hurt. Days and weeks of experiencing numbness to the entire world around him, all he knew was the wrenching feeling, the aching, and the emptiness that demanded every ounce of his attention. After two weeks of aching, Alan began smoking. There was something about the act of smoking, which reminded him that he was still alive, and at the same time spited the life, which he was forced to continue to live without his partner. At least he could focus on the feel of the smoke as it entered his lungs, notice the way the cigarette balanced between his thumb and forefinger, and watch the smoke curl into the air and disappear. At least he had something to experience besides the cavern of emptiness and pain that was inside of him.

At the same time as he began smoking, Alan began to buy fruit. It wasn't for the taste – Alan always hated fruit. It certainly wasn't for the health, as Alan began to smoke every day. It was the act of choosing, of having some level of control for which he yearned. He would spend hours looking at selections of grapefruits, mangos, melons, peaches, strawberries, and apples. He didn't trust the pre-bagged, or pre-boxed options; a bruised, rotten, or bug infested fruit could be hiding amidst all the others. No, he himself had to meticulously pick out the best of the selection. He even began to bring a flashlight to shine on the fruit so he could really see if the fruit was rotten or ripe. The clerks at the supermarket got used to Alan's presence, and seeing that he wasn't a threat, just worked around him. Sometimes someone would offer him a stool or suggest the newest, freshest shipment of fruit that had arrived. Alan didn't say much, just walked to the fruit each day, and found some comfort in the process of choosing, of feeling the texture in his hands, and of finding that near perfect fruit. It was one of the few times in the day that he felt he had control, that he still had some freedom over his life, feeling, and existence. It was his comfort, his escape, and his solace. So every day, Alan would go and find the best fruit, buy it, bring it home, and

then throw it away the next morning and repeat the cycle.

Tonight was different. It was Sunday evening and Alan hated to pick out fruit on a Sunday evening. There wasn't enough light, and the stock by that time had gone bad, but tonight, he found himself here, in the supermarket, picking out fruit in a desperate search for control, for feeling, and for escape. Alan placed another apple on the bottom right hand side of the bin, and picked up his third for close inspection. As he began to fall into the safety of his routine, his thoughts turned to the events, which led him to this fruit selection on a Sunday evening.

That morning Alan went to church. All his life, Alan was very particular about which church he attended, who else went there, what the church practiced, and what it believed. It took four years to find his current church. Four years of examining, peering, questioning, and holding the light at a scrutinizing closeness to the individuals and collective whole. His wife would chide him for his pious demand of perfection.

"You're never going to find the perfect church, Alan. You expect too much, and will always be disappointed."

"Ephesians 5:8... 'You are now the light and should live as the light,'" Alan smartly replied. "A true Christian is no longer in the dark, but lives a perfect life without blemish or bruise."

Alan's wife would just smile, sigh, and go along with him from church to church until they finally found one that best fit Alan's list of criteria. It was, to no surprise, a fundamentalists, landmark, born again, Wesleyan perfectionist church that expected all of its members to adhere to a strict moral code of living, and had a high expectation of perfection. It was the perfect church with perfect people that Alan was looking for. He and his wife joined, became deacons, and made the church a big part of their lives. But when his wife died, when his world fell around him, and when all that he held dear was lost, Alan found it difficult to go to church and praise the God who took his wife. He found it difficult to act happy when all he felt was emptiness and pain. He found it difficult to discuss things like the sin of wearing shirtsleeves shirts without a bow tie, and why bittersweet chocolate was permissible but not sweet, dark chocolate. He didn't care any more. Alan now wanted to curse God, scream and then shout at the happy people. He did not want the light and the joy they so readily emitted. So for a while, Alan stopped attending his beloved church, and grieved.

It was two weeks ago that Alan felt that he was ready to return to church. The pain had lessened; he began to see things a little more clearly, and was more curious than anything else to see what would happen. He wasn't ready to lift his hands, he wasn't ready to offer a testimony of thanks, but he no longer felt the hatred that he felt earlier. So Alan sat in the back like a guilty observer, like a creature of the night hiding from the light, and just dipped his feet into the pool perfection that he once so boldly claimed, remembering what it was like. He snuck out during the last hymn.

He didn't have the courage to go to the Monday noontime bible study, the Tuesday evening prayer session, the Wednesday evening testimony service, the Thursday morning spiritual strength training, or even the Friday afternoon fellowship. But that following Sunday he went back to church and again sat in the back, in the corner of the hall, and again left early so that no one would notice him. Yet this time he felt a little more comfortable in the service, he felt himself relaxing, and some peace, although a very little, came over him.

Alan placed the next apple on the right side, atop a growing pile of bruised, blemished, and marked fruit. He picked up the next one and held it up to the light to examine it for any imperfection. His pile of perfect apples was still without participants. Alan had not yet found the perfect fruit.

It was this past Wednesday when Alan received a letter from his church. It was a formally written letter inviting him to meet with the Deacons and the pastor in the parlor after service on that following Sunday. Alan's stomach dropped – he had written these letters before and knew what this was about. These were letters of inquisition, of examination and of rebuke. He was getting the light turned on him; he was being called to question. Alan knew that he had not been the best Christian in the past couple of months, but assumed that his wife's death was justification for his actions. He tried to give the church the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they wanted to help. Maybe the community wanted to reach out to him and be the supportive church without blemish that it claimed to be. Hope is easily worded, but in the pit of his stomach, Alan knew what the purpose was for the meeting.

It was with fear and trembling that Alan went to church. He couldn't focus during the service, but wondered what would happen, how closely would they look at his life, and what might the accusations be. He had seen these sessions, these trials before, he had even led these sessions once or twice, and they

rarely went well. During the final hymn, Alan went outside, smoked half a cigarette, and then returned into the church, and went to the parlor for the Deacon's meeting.

They were waiting for him. There were ten of them and the pastor, sitting down in couches, armchairs, and plush benches arranged in a semi-circle, in the very comfortable parlor. In the center of the room, facing the group was one metal folding chair, looking as if it had already undergone a period of questioning. When Alan entered the room no one said a word, no one looked at him. The pastor stood up, and pointed with an open hand towards the metal folding chair,

"Please, have a seat."

Alan sat down with his hands on knees, back straight, and was feeling very uncomfortable. The pastor started,

"Alan, we realize that your wife died a few months ago, and we have been praying for you, but..."

"You're not welcome here any more!" Mr. Stevens, the head deacon burst interrupting the pastor. Mr. Stevens was an older man who felt speech should be like financial planning – the bottom line is the most important. Alan felt his world spinning, his head was getting light, and his heart was pounding.

"I'm, uh, I'm sorry but what did you say?" Alan stammered.

"You're not welcome here any more! Go find some half-hearted, come-as-you-are church that 'claims' to be Christian." Mr. Stevens was leaning forward in his chair, one arm holding him down to the chair, and the other flailing wildly about, pointing towards the window, as if the church he referred to could be seen from the parlor.

The pastor interjected.

"What Mr. Stevens is trying to say is your conduct and behavior has not been in line with what we believe to be the Christian lifestyle, and well, you know how it is, we are of the light, we are Christ's children, so we must live in a very specific way.... I'm sorry." The pastor almost whispered the last bit, and looked down at the floor with a guilty need for an escape hatch.

Alan felt as if he was falling, and scrambling for something to grab a hold of.

"Why? What have I done? Is it the smoking? I can quit. It was just that I miss my wife so much..." Tears started to well up in Alan's eyes, and more than anything he wished she were there right now.

The pastor started to loosen his top button, "Yes, the smoking is a part of it. We know you miss your wife, and her death was hard, but..."

Mrs. Jones jumped in this time. "We are the light! We don't mourn, we don't cry for them who go to Jesus, we celebrate, and can't wait for the time when we will get there too." Before she finished, Mr. Stevens was on his feet, his finger pointing at Alan,

"You can't stop going to church, and then expect to return whenever you want. Death does not get in the way of Christ, not if you are a true believer. When my wife died..."

"True believer? True believer!" Alan was now on his feet staring right into Mr. Stevens eyes. "What do you know about being a true believer? Who came to comfort me when my wife died? Who came to be with me when she went to 'be with God.'? Not one of you came to my door, called my home, or stopped by to visit. My God, you accuse me of not being a true believer." Alan's words began to taste bitter in his mouth. "I needed to know that I wasn't alone, so I spent my days at the Supermarket, because not one person from this church took the time to offer help, compassion, or consolation. I needed help and no one offered. And you consider yourselves believers?" Alan and Mr. Stevens were inches from each other. They were both breathing heavy, sweating, and staring in each other's eyes, lost in the rage and anger which they both shared. The pastor touched Alan's arm, bringing Alan back to the room, back to reality.

"I think you should go." Guilt, compassion, and fear were all mixed the invitation to leave.

Alan looked at the pastor; his face was weak and scared. He looked at Mr. Stevens with his chest puffed out and eyes burning with rage and hatred. He looked at the other deacons, some of whom were looking at the ground for that escape hatch, others looking off in the distance, avoiding the conflict in the center of the room. Guilt emitted from all of them. Alan looked around at them, at the room, plush, perfect, and then at the picture of Jesus on the fireplace behind all of the deacons. Then, in a quick and decisive move, he spun around and walked towards the door. His fingers moved towards the handle, and he then he spun around again. He spat and whispered out his words,

"You are the light, but you don't care what is pleasing to the Lord. All you are concerned with are

the petty ways you live your life, and the ways you can condemn others. I can see now, the light is shining on all of you and you are rotten, bruised, and bastard fruits. You can try to hide yourself, but when the light shines, your true, ugly parts will show.” Alan stared at all of the Deacons and the pastor, waiting for a response or a reaction, and then spat on the floor, “God help you,” and stormed out of the church.

All the way to the supermarket Alan’s thoughts were rage, anger, and heat. He could not focus, he could not make sense of up or down, or where he was going. He was full of rage. He burst through the doors, not waiting for the automatic to work and shot towards the produce section.

Alan held up another apple and stared at it, wanting to find a mark, a blemish, an imperfection. Oh how he needed his wife, oh how he wanted her to offer her cool, soft and loving words of comfort. What would she say, what did she say when they were searching for the perfect church. “You expect too much, Alan, you will never find that perfect church. You forget the end of your beloved passage that you always quote. You forget Ephesians 5:14, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and *Christ will shine on you.*’ Only through Christ will we be the light. We can’t do it, only Christ can, and we have to trust that he will.”

Alan wanted to yell to the wife of his memories, “but we must be perfect, we are called to be perfect, that is what it means to follow Christ, to be perfect, to be light.” Alan held up another apple. He was shouting out loud now. “Do you see; we can’t do it! We can’t be without blemish.” He placed the apple in the bottom, discarded pile, and reached for the last apple. “Why would Christ call us to be light, if we can’t do it? Why would we be tested when we are bound to fail?” Alan picked up the apple and held it up to the light. “We can’t do it, we can’t do it, we can’t do it. God help us, for we can’t be the light that we are called to be.” He began to look at the apple, “There is no perfect church,” he began to again turn it around, “there is no perfect Christian,” and then he stopped. Tears began to fall down his cheeks, his arm holding the apple fell, and without looking at that last apple, Alan walked to the cashier, paid for the fruit, and headed home. As Alan walked out of the parking lot, he finally looked at the apple still in his hand. The darkness of the night made it difficult to see the fruit clearly. It was the best apple he had ever eaten.

AMEN