

12A

RELIGION

Produce
fruit or
just
barren?

**Sunday
School Lesson**

Devotional reading: John
15:18-27
Lesson scripture: John 15:1-
17

The spiritual life of mankind is equally dependent on a vital connection with its source in God, through His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. The Lord himself said so, in terms familiar to fruit growers everywhere.

Matthew 21 records an unusual event in the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. Walking from Bethany into Jerusalem, the Lord passed a fig tree. He examined it and found that it was full of leaves, but had no fruit. Jesus said it would never bear fruit and it withered and died.

It had used them to build its own roots, stems, branches and leaves. But it was missing the one thing God created it to produce: figs! It was full of activity but no fruit.

Churches and people also can be very busy and still produce no fruit. What happens as a result of the ministries carried on by your church? Do they result in changed lives in the salvation of lost people and in the making of disciples. Are you producing fruit or leaves?

The sharp blade of Jesus' teaching had been at work on the apostles for about three years, cutting away at their worldly pride and ambition, convincing them to leave all else behind and follow Him. They still had much to learn, but they were on their way. The same cleansing work conveyed through Scripture, is available to all who will hear, believe and obey.

The branch cannot bear fruit on its own power; neither can it bear fruit that is foreign to its own vine. A grapevine does not bear figs nor a Christian produce the works of the devil. The fruit bearing capacity of the one living in Christ is amazingly great. For one who relies on his own power, there is no capacity at all.

Against their dad's orders, two brothers were playing football on the lawn next to their dad's tomato patch. "Go long," the quarterback called as he rifled a pass just beyond the outstretched fingertips of his receiver. It was a beautiful diving catch, but the downfield brother landed on the tomato patch.

Frantically, the boys re-tied the plants but left the half dozen tomatoes they had broken off. To cover their crime, the pair worked a little magic with clear adhesive tape.

For close to a week their dad was none the wiser. But in time the atrophying plants begged for closer examination, which revealed that the dying fruit was not really attached to the vine. The ruse was up and the two deceivers were brought to justice.

Jesus' analogy of the branches and the vine shows that unless we are connected to Him, we cannot bear fruit, and eventually we will die. Are you really connected to Him or are you just taped up for show?

BE CALM AMID STORMS

*Do for self is
McKenzie's
message*

By John Minter
THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Rev. Vashti Murphy McKenzie's message, preached throughout the world, calls for calm in the midst of the storm, whether that storm is rapidly spreading technological progress or societal perennials such as racism and prejudice.

"The things that have sustained us through the years have been the church and the family," McKenzie said. "We were always determined to be as close to God as we could and that our families would stay together."

"If folks wouldn't educate us, we opened our own schools and educated ourselves. When they wouldn't hire us, we started our own businesses. When our children were cut off from their families because of the hardships of life, we turned around and brought in other children cut off from their families. We kept our elderly close. We did not send them away."

"We need to remember what sustained us in the past," McKenzie said. "These are the things that will sustain us in the future."

McKenzie, a Howard University-trained minister, keynoted a revival this week at C.N. Jenkins Presbyterian Church on Statesville Avenue.

She's pastor of the Payne Memorial AME Church in Baltimore's urban core and national chaplain of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

McKenzie's roots in the sorority run deep. She's the granddaughter and namesake of Delta Sigma Theta co-founder Vashti Turley Murphy.

A pastor since 1984, Rev. McKenzie was honored by Ebony magazine in 1993 as a Great African American

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The Rev. Vashti McKenzie stresses self-reliance.

Eye On Gospel

On a Mission from God: "All I sing about is love." That is quite simply Cissy Houston's rationale for singing both gospel and secular music, while at the same time skirting the ever-raging debate for making a choice between the two. And that just may be the reason she gets away with it.

In the '60s she had a Top 10 hit with the 1968 release "Sweet Inspiration." In the early '70s, as a solo artist, she charted with the 1971 hit "Be My Baby." Now she's back on a mission from God with a spirited blend of blues, jazz, traditional and contemporary gospel spanning church standards like "Amazing Grace" to a revamped version of Marvin Gaye's "How Sweet It Is." Despite the fact that the veteran singer, who also happens to be the mother of superstar Whitney Houston, is more

known for her R&B, she insists that she's never left gospel. Fact is, she got her start in gospel at the age of five while touring with her family gospel group, the Drinkard Singers and has over her lifetime remained very active in church. She serves as minister of music at her Newark, N.J.-based church and is also heavily involved in their youth program. Houston's album, titled "Face to Face," marks the second gospel release from the House of Blues Music Company record label and she intends to take an active role in its promotion. "This is something I have always wanted to do," Cissy Houston reports. "I'd like to know that someone is really listening to what I am singing and that makes a difference." And for Houston, the project is not a one shot deal. She hopes to do

more gospel — perhaps even to reunite the remaining six of eight brothers and sisters for a family gospel project.

Coming attractions: Malaco has set a June release date for the forthcoming project from the Mississippi Mass Choir. The project, which was recorded live at Jackson State University, also features Walter Hawkins, Brian Williams and the Williams Brothers. Meanwhile, Savoy has pushed back the release of Shun Pace's next album until July. On May 12, Vickie Winans will celebrate her 10th year anniversary in the gospel industry with the recording of her fifth album, "Live in Detroit." The recording is slated to take place at Straight Gate Church, pastored by Bishop Andrew Merritt. Serving as hosts for the night's festivities are Bobby Jones, Yolanda Adams, and Evangelist Debra Morton

, co-pastor of Greater St. Stephens Baptist Church. **Briefly:** The Georgia Mass Choir recently wrapped work in "The Preacher's Wife," starring Denzel Washington. They play members of a church choir that is directed by Houston. Assisting with the music is former Take 6 member Mervyn Warren, while Lionel Richie is featured as a piano player in the final musical number. "The Preacher's Wife," a remake of the Cary Grant classic "The Bishop's Wife," is being slated to hit theaters this Christmas.

This week's scripture: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual song, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord — Colossians 3:16

**Bringing
independence
to mothers**
Program counsels
women in need

By Tammie Tolbert
THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Renaissance Mentoring Group is on a mission to help welfare mothers gain independence.

"The program is designed for welfare mothers between the ages of 18 to 55 who have at least one child, but no more than three," said Rev. Kevin Butler, founder and executive director of the mentoring group. The program's goals are to counsel, train, and develop these women in various areas of their lives.

Renaissance focuses on educational preparation so that women can have an opportunity to receive a high school diploma, or complete their GED, and then move on to a career path that leads to a degree, vocational certificate, technical degree, or the desire to become an entrepreneur.

Rev. Butler believes that this type of program is needed because the federal government has already set the wheels in motion to reform the welfare system. "In the state of Virginia, welfare mothers are already feeling the effects of the reform because the government has given them until 1998 to become self-sufficient," he said. "The government Work and Responsibility Act is designed for welfare recipients to either receive employment training, secure a permanent job, or lose their financial benefits. "There are five million families who receive welfare assistance," Butler said. "Programs like the Renaissance program will assist the government in rehabilitating women so they can become productive."

Renaissance is geared to take on 50 families. In helping mothers, the program will also invest in an interest-building savings account for the children that will go in an educational trust fund for college.

John Martin, President of SABRE Consulting, is another director of the program. "Rev. Butler and I agreed that there were some needs in our community that were not being met and instead of continually talking about it, we decided to create a mission statement and develop this program," Martin said. "There are a lot of people out there in their 20s and 30s and maybe older who want to make a change, but they don't know how and we think that this program will offer them that chance."

"Our projected goal is to house all of our skill centers in churches, be it Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, or Pentacostal," Butler said. "It is also important for the women to have their spiritual needs met."

"This program will be successful because it is a concerted effort of the church, community, corporations and foundations to reach a real life solution to an old age problem," Butler said.

"I think that we need to reach back into the community because for so long we have kept everything within the church walls," said Rev. Bobby Houze of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. "I look at this as an outreach ministry because we are reaching out and trying to help those who are really suffering."

If you are interested in finding out more about the Renaissance Mentoring Group, call Butler at 535-4999.

Black leaders promise 'church watch'

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — A statewide "church watch" program is being organized by black leaders who are worried that black churches are being targeted by arsonists.

Leaders from black congregations and the NAACP on Tuesday announced their plan

to work with law enforcement, churches and civil rights groups to man the program.

"We ... would warn those with evil intentions to be aware that they will not go unnoticed," said the Rev. Joseph Darby. "This is 1996, not 1946, and the atrocities of

the past will not be tolerated." Last month, a rural black church in Barnwell County was gutted by fire. Two predominantly white churches nearby also were damaged.

Federal agents are investigating a number of fires among black churches across

the South, and they met with members of the NAACP this week.

Darby, with the South Carolina Coalition of Black Church Leaders, said he welcomes whites and blacks to work together to monitor churches.