

Sermon on Luke 13 1- 9 February 28, 2016

*Repent or Perish:* It was just at this moment that some people came up to tell Jesus the story of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with that of their own sacrifices. Jesus made this reply to them: "Are you thinking that these Galileans were worse sinners than any others of Galilee because this happened to them? I assure you that is not so. You will all die, just as miserable a death unless your hearts are changed! You remember those eighteen people who were killed at Siloam when the tower collapsed upon them? Are you imagining that they were worse offenders than any of the other people who lived in Jerusalem? I assure you they were not. You will all die as tragically unless your whole outlook is changed!

*The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree:* Then Jesus gave them this parable:" Once upon a time a man had a fig-tree growing in his garden, and when he came to look for the figs, he found none at all. So he said to his gardener, 'Look, I have come expecting fruit on this fig-tree for three years running and never found any. Better cut it down. Why should it use up valuable space?' And the gardener replied, 'Master, don't touch it this year till I have had a chance to dig round it and give it a bit of manure. Then, if it bears after that, it will be all right. But if it doesn't, then you can cut it down.'"

We are half way through Lent, this season of 40 days of prayer and fasting and giving to those in need; this season of decluttering our hearts and souls and lives to make more room for God's presence. This is a season of walking the spiritual life more intentionally. Our gathering songs this morning were all about walking. These 40 days of Lent echo the 40 days Jesus walked in the desert, in the company of wild animals, and the devil. Jesus' 40 days in the desert mirrored the 40 years the Israelites walked in the wilderness, in the company of hunger, thirst, and despair. The 40 days of Lent are an invitation to walk in the desert and through the wilderness, in the company of Jesus. We are meant to find, as He did, more vulnerability and dependence on God. We are meant to fast from things that can fill us, or distract us, or seduce us, and instead turn to God. As we walk through Lent we are meant to respond to the devil's temptations as Jesus did: with the word of God, with the certainty that God is with us, and with the understanding of ourselves as God's beloved sons and daughters.

Sometimes in the fasting and the repentance and the austerity of Lent we forget those three things that were so integrated into Jesus, that He was armed with when He faced the devil: the word of God, the presence of God, and the love of God. In these 40 days of Lent we can become so focused on our own brokenness and sinfulness (even acknowledging our temptations and addictions can cause us despair) and we forget about the love of God that is always with us, and always for us. Today's scripture lesson is about love and repentance and... manure. The manure in Jesus' parable seems to be the heart of the lesson.

It was a common belief among the Jews that illness, tragedies, so-called "acts of God" or anything bad that happened to a person was the result of their sin. It wasn't simply "manure happens" but rather "It's your fault that manure happened to you." Jesus debunks this theology here in today's scripture lesson. People have come to tell Jesus about Pilate's murder of those who were making sacrifices at the temple, and then leaving the murdered people and sacrificed animals to bleed together. The people who

came to Jesus were upset and angry, of course, but also looking for somewhere to lay blame. (And if the belief was that a person's sin caused the tragedy to happen, God would ultimately be the One to blame.) Do you remember the story from John's gospel about the man who was born blind? The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, for this man to have been born blind, who sinned, him or his parents?" Jesus said to them, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do."

This time Jesus is much less tender and patient in His answer about who is to blame. His fellow Galileans might be trying to provoke Jesus to anger, to take sides against Pilate and the Romans, and perhaps to get revenge. But Jesus addressed the real issue of sin and repentance and rather harshly recommended they look within to their own behavior, their own wrong-doing, and the need to repent. He rebuked the theology that the sins of the murdered Galileans and the innocent bystanders at Siloam caused these terrible things to happen to them. But He's consistent with the message He taught the disciples about the blind man. It's not about cause and effect... it's about looking for what God can do.

And if those who came to Jesus were hoping that He'd cast blame or seek revenge they were disappointed when Jesus said that without their repentance, without them turning from their own sin and towards God... they - and all of us - would have no hope. Here I like *The Message* translation better than the JB Phillips translation that's printed in the bulletin. "Jesus said, 'Unless you turn to God, you too will die.'" First century men and women knew better than we do that we're all going to die. Their life expectancy was 29 years. Why did Jesus say, "Unless you turn to God, you too will die"? I can picture Jesus' listeners leaning in closer to hear what was coming. Would Jesus continue this lesson that life is short and unpredictable and being right with God now and not later makes repentance so crucial? Those who knew Him best knew that Jesus was a teacher, but at heart, He was a storyteller. In a lesson or a lecture, we can almost float on the surface of the words, but in a story we are drawn into layers of meaning and into the deeps of imagination. And so Jesus told a story about a farmer and a fig tree and manure.

Garrison Keillor was the host of National Public Radio's "Prairie Home Companion" for decades. His opening words were always the same: "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my hometown out there on the edge of the prairie." Those words always drew me into the story Garrison Keillor told... I was engaged, somehow woven into his story. This week I've heard a lot of stories from people who are dealing with heartbreak and disappointment and death. It hasn't been a quiet week here in Lafayette... it's been full of hard and sad news. Many people are finding themselves in the desert, in the company of the devil. It's almost like it's Lent. It is Lent. A season of spiritual housecleaning, of looking at the messes in our lives, of facing the spiritual barrenness within us, of admitting our need for a Savior, and of relying on the mercy of God.

Once upon a time, Jesus said... and His listeners were woven into the story He began to tell. There was a fig-tree growing in a garden that produced no fruit, and for three years the owner of the garden had been looking for figs and the tree hadn't produced any. So the owner said to the gardener, "Better cut it down. Why should it use

up valuable space?” But the gardener argued for the fig-tree. He said, “Master, don’t touch it this year till I have had a chance to dig around it and give it a bit of manure.”

Manure is a euphemism for the bad, awful, terrible things that happen to us because we are human... we are creatures, not gods, and we live in a fallen world. Manure happens. The dictionary says that manure is any natural substance for fertilizing the soil. It’s also what compost is: any material that enriches the soil and gives nourishment to the plant.

When people share stories of heartbreak and tragedy with me I’m always aware of the need to give responses that don’t stink of manure. Religious platitudes are especially offensive odors to people who are suffering. I’ve learned to ask, “Where is Jesus in this?” Even in this pile of manure, where is Jesus? I might ask, “What can He teach you? What are you learning? What’s growing in you?”

In Jesus’ story... the farmer was looking for growth, for fruitfulness, for sweet, juicy, green and purple figs for his children to feast on, for his wife to cook with, to share with his neighbors. He was looking for a harvest. That’s what repentance looks like in us: a harvest of good fruit that nourishes us and feeds others. Jesus said (over and over) that the true harvest is love... extravagant, soul-filling love for God, and compassionate, generous love for others, and love for ourselves as God’s own. Love is the harvest the gardener is looking for in us. Otherwise... we might as well be cut down to make room for something else that’s fruit-bearing.

The owner of the garden is God, who is looking for a fruit-producing fig-tree. And the gardener is Jesus, who defends and tends the tree. And the manure? I believe that the manure is the compost of our lives... our mistakes, our sin, heartbreak, loss, joys and sorrows... God can use all of it (which doesn’t mean that God causes it) to enrich the spiritual soil of our lives. When manure happens... God can use it, if we allow God, to grow strong roots and sturdy branches and sweet fruit in us... that will feed us, and bless and nurture others, and bring glory to God.

In Jesus’ story God is owner of the garden, and the gardener, and we are meant to keep looking... to find Jesus in one more place in this story of the barren fig-tree. We are meant to see Jesus as the nourishment that is planted around the tree to give it life and bring it to fruition. We are meant to see the blood of Christ poured out around the roots of the tree. Jesus is the compost, the organic material, whose life was offered up for us, out of love for us, and given back to us for our growth, for our fruitfulness, for our salvation.

Let’s get to the heart of Jesus’ story. God did not cause the fig-tree to be barren but God, the owner of the garden, expected and needed to see fruit. A fig-tree is not an ornamental tree but a tree meant to feed and sustain humanity. God is the impatient owner who needs to nourish a growing and hungry family. And God is the gardener who argues with the owner to save the tree. God is not arguing against God for us. In Jesus’ story God is working out a plan to save us. At the end of Jesus’s story we see that God, the owner of the garden and also the gardener is also the life-giving compost (the crucified, buried, and resurrected Christ) who gives God’s self to us so that we can bear fruit and survive.

To ignore this gift of God’s sacrificial love for us is to die, to wither, to remain spiritually barren, and of no use in God’s garden. We must repent, which means to turn around, to be mindful and grateful and amazed for God’s plan of salvation for us, and

for the world. God's plan for us is that we are fruitful trees that bear a harvest of love, forgiveness, justice, mercy, and compassion. We are to be food for the world.

We are half way through Lent and it's not too late to begin a spiritual practice that will allow God to tend and fertilize, and grow life-giving spiritual fruit in you. It's not too late... although, Jesus said in His opening comments to the Galileans... the time is short and the need for repentance is now and the consequences are dire.

As we begin a time of prayer, and of silence, please consider Jesus' story about love, and repentance, and manure... and the invitation to walk with Him in throughout these 40 days of Lent. Amen.