

Cultivating the Soil
Luke 13:1–9
Sunday, March 20, 2022 (Lent 3)

Let's pray: Not *my* word, O Lord, but *your* word be spoken, that not *our* will, but *your* will be done, in Christ. Amen.

The owner of a vineyard plants a fig tree, and after three years it still isn't producing any figs, so he resolves to cut it down and plant something that's going to *produce* something. But the gardener says, "Give it one more year. Let me work on it. Let me cultivate the soil. If it bears fruit next year, great. If not, you can cut it down." But Jesus never tells us what happens with the fig tree in this parable. We never hear if it actually *makes* it. Because that's not really the point of this parable.

Jesus rarely *explains* his parables. The few times that he does, he does so *after* he tells the parable. The disciples come to him and say, "Explain this to us! Tell us what it means!" and Jesus tells them. So the explanation typically *follows* the parable...except in Luke's gospel. In Luke's gospel, what helps us understand the parable many times is what happens right *before* the parable. Something *happens*, or Jesus *does* something, and *then* tells a parable in response to help his disciples better understand this thing that he has taught or done. On its surface, this parable seems pretty easy to understand. But if we look back to the *first* part of this reading, we might find something that helps us understand it in a *new way*.

So in the first part of this reading, we get this strange story where some people who have been listening to Jesus teach throughout chapter 12 tell him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Apparently, some people from Galilee (the same region that Jesus lived in), had been worshipping in the Temple in Jerusalem, and Pilate (the Roman

governor of that area) had them killed and then mixed their blood with the burnt offerings or whatever kind of offerings they were making at the Temple, thus desecrating their offering.

We don't know *who* told Jesus about it or *why* they even brought it up. There was a common Jewish belief that *suffering* was the result of God's judgment of *sin*. So this thinking that people *suffer* because they have sinned. And Jesus says to this, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that they are worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Then Jesus talks about eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. And he says, "Do you think that *they* were worse offenders than anyone else living in Jerusalem?" Siloam was a section of Jerusalem, and there was apparently a *tower* there that collapsed and fell on some people. But no one *knows* exactly what happened, with *this* and with the story about Pilate and the sacrifices. There is no historical record of either of these. They have been lost to time. So let's think of some contemporary examples.

The other week I flew down to Florida for the funeral of my aunt. She had been diagnosed with ALS in December of 2020, deteriorated very rapidly, and died a year later. Do you think that my aunt suffered in this way because she was a worse sinner than me?

Do you think that when a hurricane hits, or an earthquake or flood or some other kind of natural disaster, that the people affected by it are being punished for their sin?

Do you think that the people who got Covid over the past two years are worse sinners than the people who *didn't*?

Do you think that the people of Ukraine are being made to suffer because they are worse sinners than the people of Russia? Or *us*?

Some people might say, “Yes,” to some of these – some people *have* – but I think that most of us in our heart of hearts don’t believe that God really works this way. It’s just how we try to make sense out of that which seems so senseless. We want *someone* to be in control when everything seems so *out of control*. And it’s easier to blame *God* than to have no explanation at all.

What *Jesus* says to this is, “No, these people didn’t suffer because they were *worse sinners* than anyone else.” I think it’s important to notice that Jesus didn’t say they *weren’t* sinners but just that they weren’t *worse* sinners than anyone else. But,” Jesus says, “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Now, of course he didn’t mean that if you don’t repent of your sin that a tower is going to fall on you or someone is going to kill you and mix your blood in the offering plate. He’s not saying, “You’re going to die the exact same way that *they* did.” And he does not *dispute* or *affirm* the connection between sin and suffering. He doesn’t answer that question. He essentially says, “It doesn’t matter, because we’re all going to die.” (Cheery first sermon back, right?)

It reminds me of when I was down in Florida for my aunt’s funeral. It was a full Catholic mass – the first time I’ve sat through a mass in years – and it was *beautiful*. The urn that held my aunt’s ashes was on this little stand right in between the altar and the congregation. And at one point, the priest walked down to it and said, “So often we focus our attention elsewhere and ignore *this*. But I want you to look at it. Let it remind you of how *fragile* life is, and that sooner or later we are *all* going to end up *here*. So what will you *do* with your life before then?”

I think *that's* what Jesus is getting at here. He doesn't seem interested in solving the age-old question of why people suffer. What he's reminding them – and *us* – is that life is *fragile*. It could end at any moment. And life's fragility gives it *urgency*. So he calls people to *repent* of their sin. The Greek word that Luke uses here is the word *metanoia*, which means, “to change one's mind.” This is more than an intellectual act of *thinking* about our sin. It involves changing the focus of our lives, changing our moral direction, changing the way we *live*. The Hebrew word that Jesus would have used is *shuv*, which literally means, “to turn.” It is to turn *away* from sin and turn back *to* God; to reorient our lives to the way, the truth, and the life. To *repent* is to turn things around and live in a distinctly different way.

And what Jesus says is, “It's not too late.” After the call to repentance, he tells this parable in which a tree is not bearing any fruit, so it's going to be cut down, but the gardener says, “No, no. Give it time. Let me work with it. Let me tend the soil and nurture it. Be patient, and let's see what it can do. Maybe it can still bear fruit.” It reminds me how ten chapters earlier, at the beginning of Luke's gospel, John the Baptist calls people to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” For even now, he says, “the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down.” Christ calls us to live lives that bear good fruit, and he calls us to *repent* because he believes that, despite our sin, we can *still* bear good fruit.

Jesus follows the call to repentance with a parable of divine patience. That's what this parable is showing us, that there is an expectation that we will live lives that bear good fruit for the glory of God, and God is willing to give us *time* to do that. It's like the Apostle Peter says in his second letter, “God is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” Just as the gardener is patient with the fig tree, so God is patient with us, that we may yet bear fruit.

It's worth noting that, in this parable, the patience is not unlimited. "Give it *one more year*," the gardener says. "One more year to turn it around, and then if it still isn't bearing fruit, you can cut it down." There is an *urgency* here. *Our* time is not unlimited. What Jesus is saying here is that whether we are righteous or sinners, we are *all* going to die, so turn it around and bear good fruit while you still can.

Paul tells us what that fruit *looks* like. It's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Jesus is saying, "It's *never* too late to bear that fruit." It's never too late to become a more *loving* person, a more *joyful* person, a more *patient* person, a *kinder* person, a more *generous* person, a more *faithful* person, a *gentler* person, a more *prayerful* person. It is never too late to become a better husband or wife, a better father or mother, a better son or daughter, a better friend, a better pastor. There is *time* to turn it around. That time is not *unlimited*. But it's never too late to do it before it's too late.

Now, in order to bear that good fruit, we have to cultivate the soil of our lives. Just as the gardener digs out the base and puts fertilizer on it, we have to clear away that which does not need to be in our lives (that's repentance), and we need to enrich the soil with that which is good for us and nourishes our faith. How do we do that? What does that look like?

In the time that I was away, I came to a lot of realizations and clarity. And one of the things that became very clear to me is that the most important aspect of our faith – of our *lives* – is nurturing our relationship with God through the regular practice of reading scripture and prayer. Everything else flows from that. Our mission, our engagement with the world around us *does not matter* if it is not coming from a place of knowing and loving God, and the way that we *come* to that knowledge and love of God is through scripture and prayer. Some of you might already

be doing that, others might not, but it is never too late to start, especially in this season of Lent in which we are called to cultivate and let go.

So here's what I want to invite you to do to cultivate the soil of your life. There are 29 days left until Easter, including today. There are 28 chapters in the gospel of Matthew. I want to invite you to join with me in reading a chapter a day. There is a schedule on the back of the hymn insert in your bulletin. We'll read a chapter a day, starting today, except for the day before Easter (the day when Christ is in the tomb) when we will just read five verses at the end of chapter 27. And then on Easter Sunday, we'll read chapter 28, the story of Jesus' resurrection. There are also on the insert two prayers that you can pray before and after you read.

You might think, "I don't have time to do this each day." First of all, you *do* have time, because God is patient. But also, the longest chapter in Matthew is chapter 26. It's 75 verses and takes ten minutes to read (I timed it, and I read slowly). And actually, if you come to our Maundy Thursday service, we'll read it together there. Ten minutes out of your day to cultivate your relationship with God. You don't even have to read it all at once. You can split it up throughout the day. Don't worry about trying to understand or figure out everything you're reading. It's okay if you can't pronounce all the names. It's okay if you don't know what something *means*. Just pay attention to Jesus, what he's saying and what he's doing. Just listen to the story. Read it out loud. This was *meant* to be read out loud. It helps you to slow down and be more intentional about what you're reading. Pray the prayers out loud. If you don't have a Bible at home, take one from here, we have more. There are also Bible apps that you can get on your phone, so you can read anywhere, anytime.

This isn't some magic bullet that, after 29 days you'll be totally transformed. It's a step. Spiritual growth is slow and it takes time. And just like the gardener digging out that fig tree and putting manure on it, spiritual growth is hard work that sometimes stinks. But there is no more important thing in your life than knowing the one who created you, who redeemed you, and who sustains you. Because *that* is where your life finds its meaning.

This is not a "try harder" sermon, like if we just *do more*, pray more, read scripture more, *try harder* then we will be more faithful people. I am mindful of the story in John's gospel when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and encounters the resurrected Christ, but she doesn't recognize him right away. And John says, "Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him..." *Supposing him to be the gardener*. The gardener who is patient with us and gives us time. The gardener who cultivates the soil so that the tree might bear fruit. Christ is the gardener of our lives, and he does not leave us to cultivate ourselves. As we read scripture, as we pray, Christ is at work within us. We are simply opening ourselves up to his cultivation, giving ourselves to the one who gave himself to us. It is never too late to do that before it is too late.