

A Fruitful Life

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a story about a landowner who was checking on the progress of a fig tree. The landowner tells his gardener, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"

The landowner had grown impatient with his tree.

I don't have a green thumb. I can relate to the man who said, "I have a rock garden. Last week three of them died."

But I admire anyone who does garden. Gardening takes hard work, patience, and skill. Think of it. A gardener starts with a plot of soil and dirt and takes it all the way to an abundant harvest or a beautiful patch of flowers and plants.

In the story by Luke today, the gardener defends a poor fig tree that is about to lose its life. He had not been able to take the tree into the abundant harvest that the landowner wanted. He says to the landowner, "Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

Invest some time and attention, the gardener is advising, before you give up on that tree.

The bible study group this week offered me several good titles for this sermon and I probably should have used my favorite. The title was "What is your manure?" A great title for a sermon as well as a great question.

When it comes to your faith, what is your manure? What are you using as fertilizer? In other words, how do you keep your faith living and breathing, growing and expanding.

Do you pray with any consistency? Do you make it a habit to read the bible? Do you surround yourself with other faithful people?

How do you make your faith grow?

In the 12th century, Japanese gardeners created dwarf trees, or "bonsai" trees, by cutting the tree's tap root. The tap root anchors the tree deep into the ground so that it can grow taller and wider. With the tap root severed, the tree relies on smaller, surface roots for growth. The result is a tiny tree that can be grown in a pot on your kitchen counter.

We each need to have a taproot that anchors us deep in God. Many of us have cut the tap root of faith. If we are not engaging in prayer, or studying God's Word, or dedicating ourselves to a faith community, then we are attempting to live off a surface faith, a bonsai faith. It will not be the deep abiding faith that we need. That means that when we need to turn to God, we won't. We will not know that God is there for us.

Once upon a time, there was a hurricane blowing through Texas heading straight toward Houston. A man's farm, his home and all he'd worked for, all he'd ever owned was directly in the storm's path. He didn't want to leave, and he believed the Lord would take care of him.

A bus came by and a Red Cross volunteer told the man they were evacuating everyone in the path of the hurricane. The man sat tight on his front porch and said, "The Lord will provide."

The water came up and the man retreated to the second floor of his house. A boat came by and a National Guardsman said he should get on the boat because more flooding was expected. The man sat tight and said, "The Lord will provide."

A little later he was on his roof watching water come up when a helicopter flew over. The pilot said over a loudspeaker, "Grab the hoist and we'll pull you up. It's a killer hurricane." The man sat tight and said, "The Lord will provide."

A little while later the man was speaking to Saint Peter about getting into heaven. Pete said, "Of course, your lack of faith is forgiven." The man said, "What lack of faith? I believed the Lord would provide and look what happened! The flood got me! I should complain that I was not cared for!"

Pete said, "Not cared for? We sent a bus, a boat, and a helicopter. What more do you want?"

With a strong, nurtured faith, we will see God's hand in our lives. We will confidently call upon God, trusting that God is with us.

And most importantly, with a strong faith—nurtured and cared for—we will generously and effectively serve God. We will not be useless to God as the tree was useless to the landowner. Instead, we will bear fruit.

One thing to notice in this text is that Jesus isn't asking anything extraordinary of the fig tree. He isn't asking the fig tree to become a towering redwood or a dramatic pine or a massive oak tree.

Jesus is asking only that the fig tree do what fig trees ought to do—bear figs.

We all have different gifts. Some of us have beautiful singing voices. Some are athletes. Some have high IQ's. Some are artists, others mathematicians, others are good with people. Every one of us has some natural ability. The secret is to find our natural abilities and use them to bear fruit.

You might say that that is what genius is. Finding your ability and giving it your energy—even in the face of discouragement. Especially in the face of discouragement.

Beethoven's music teacher said about him, "As a composer he is hopeless."

An editor told Louisa May Alcott that she was incapable of writing anything that would have popular appeal.

Walt Disney was once fired by a newspaper editor because he was thought to have no "good ideas."

When F. W. Woolworth was 21, he got a job in a store, but was not allowed to wait on customers because he "didn't have enough sense."

Each of these people proved to have a certain genius that wasn't necessarily intrinsic. Rather, it grew out of a dedication to the gifts God had given them. Out of a dedication to a natural ability.

Remember, God does not ask us to become what we are not. The fig tree was only required to produce figs. No more. You and I are asked only to accomplish what our natural gifts allow.

Finally, it is through a fruitful life that we reflect God's love.

There is a true story of a teacher, Miss Thompson, and her unpromising student, Ted. Ted seemed to his teacher to care very little for work. He was lazy, very sloppy in appearance. Expressionless. Unattractive. So difficult that Miss Thompson, though she hated herself for it, found that she enjoyed bearing down her red pen as she placed X's beside his many wrong answers.

If only she had studied his records more carefully. They read:

1st grade: Ted shows promise with his work and attitude, but (has) poor home situation.

2nd grade: Ted could do better. Mother seriously ill. Receives little help from home.

3rd grade: Ted is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th grade: Ted is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest whatsoever.

Christmas arrived. The children piled elaborately wrapped gifts on their teacher's desk. Ted brought one too. It was wrapped in brown paper and held together with Scotch Tape. Miss Thompson opened each gift, as the children crowded around to watch. Out of Ted's package fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half of the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to laugh. But she silenced them and splashed some of the perfume on her wrist. She put the bracelet on too.

At day's end, after the other children had left, Ted came by the teacher's desk and said, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And the bracelet looks real pretty on you. I'm glad you like my presents." He left. Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her and to change her attitude.

The next day, the children were greeted by a reformed teacher, one committed to loving each of them. Especially the difficult ones. Especially Ted. Surprisingly or maybe, not surprisingly, Ted began to show great improvement. He actually caught up with most of the students and even passed a few.

Time came and went. Miss Thompson heard nothing from Ted for a long time. Then, one day, she received this note:

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class.

Love, Ted

Four years later, another note arrived:

Dear Miss Thompson:

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

Love, Ted

And four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year.

Miss Thompson attended that wedding, and sat where Ted's mother would have sat. The compassion she had shown that young man entitled her to that privilege.

Don't you want to have such a powerful, positive impact on others? God placed that yearning in us, to live with a sense of mission and purpose. To live lovingly and boldly and joyfully for the sake of others. To live lives that reflect God's character and love. We were made for this. Anything less leads to a fruitless, ineffective life, severed from the power and purposes of God.

Your fruitfulness will be determined by how much your life reflects the character and love of God. How much we reflect God's spirit and image. It is an active faith that feeds and energizes that reflection of God.

My final burning question for you is....

What's your manure?

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Rev. Jane apologizes, but she preaches from her notes, - so her sermons may not translate as well into a printed, document format. However, she loves to discuss her sermons, - so feel free to email her with any thoughts or questions!