MEDITATION: **An Open Invitation**

March 20, 2025

Third Saturday in Lent

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### The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

6Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7So he said to the man working the vineyard, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still, I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ 8He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.’” Luke 13:6-9

Today’s sermon is about manure or poop! Oh, my goodness, don’t clutch your pearls yet. The amazing Biblical Scholar Eugene Peterson who translated the whole book into the version we frequently use for weekly worship known as The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language calls this the “Jesus Manure Story.”

We all know that manure happens. Whenever I hear a parable, I try to locate myself inside the story. Luke is my favorite Gospel writer because he is a storyteller and spills the T. He loves to talk about the begats. Who is related to whom? He gives the juicy details of a baby born into poverty. He lets Mary spill out a song of liberation we know as the Magnificat. He writes about women at the tomb prepared to anoint Jesus’ body with burial spices only to find the tomb stone rolled away and an empty grave. Give me Luke as the storyteller. Some folks love John, I love Luke.

Luke loves a good parable. And Jesus knew we just wouldn’t understand his challenging messages without some stories that connect with our real lives. He knew the women, men and children who followed him. They were Jewish people living in poverty and wealth, they were Gentiles interested in his intriguing message, they were strangers and friends. And they wanted to follow this man who was the Way, the Truth and the Light.

And so, we find ourselves in the middle of a story about a barren tree. A fig tree that produces no figs. An upset landowner who thinks he deserves a hardworking, fruit producing tree. And a gardener who isn’t ready to give up on this barren stick of a fig tree. Immediately before this parable, Luke lets us in on the content. The background Jesus was living in.

And it was a time, not that different from our own time. Pilate used murder to inspire fear in folks. When the folks went off to worship, Pilate murdered Galileans and mixed the blood of the murdered with the blood of animal sacrifice thus defiling the religious practices of the Jews. Jesus acknowledges how brutal Pilate’s murdering ways are and then he tells those who are listening to fear worse events. Pilate would only increase his slaughter of the innocents who had not confessed their sins and turned to God.

Woah there Jesus, these are some scary words. This isn’t my favorite Jesus who tells us to love one another. This is a Jesus who says confess or die. Ok, and then he knows that people don’t like this kind of turn or burn talk, so he slips in the “Jesus Manure Story.” He encourages us to practice resurrection every day. To look for the barren stick and see that with some manure, water and sun, that stick can become a flowering fruit tree. To see how in our own lives even if we are wallowing in fear or manure, we can grow out of the darkness. It is in the darkness of the womb, tomb and earth that growth begins. Life begins again. Death does not have the final word. Resurrection of the body in stick form and human form bursts forth in an empty grave covered with Easter lilies trumpeting God’s resounding yes to life and no to death. And the seeds germinate, and the fig tree sends forth leaves and then the beginnings of a new crop of fruit.

I love Peterson’s reflection where he says,

Instead of goading us into action, [Jesus' Manure Story] takes us out of action. We have just come across something that offends us, some person who is useless to us or the kingdom of God, "taking up the ground," and we lose patience and either physically or verbally get rid of him or her. "Chop him down! Chop her down! Chop it down." We solve kingdom problems by amputation. Internationally and historically, killing is the predominant method of choice to make the world a better place. It is the easiest, quickest, and most efficient way by far to clear the ground for someone or something with more promise.

The Manure Story interrupts our noisy, aggressive problem-solving mission. In a quiet voice the parable says, "Hold on, not so fast. Wait a minute. Give me some more time. Let me put some manure on this tree." Manure?

Manure is not a quick fix. It has no immediate results—it is going to take a long time to see if it makes any difference. If it's results that we are after, chopping down a tree is just the thing: we clear the ground and make it ready for a fresh start. We love beginning: birthing a baby, christening a ship, the first day on a new job, starting a war. But spreading manure carries none of that exhilaration. It is not dramatic work, not glamorous work, not work that gets anyone's admiring attention. Manure is a slow solution. Still, when it comes to doing something about what is wrong in the world, Jesus is known for his fondness for the minute, the invisible, the quiet, the slow—yeast, salt, seeds, light. And manure.

Manure does not rank high in the world's economies. It is refuse. Garbage. We organize efficient and sometimes elaborate systems to collect it, haul it away, get it out of sight and smell. But the observant and wise know that this apparently dead and despised waste is teeming with life—enzymes, numerous microorganisms. It's the stuff of resurrection.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thank you, Eugene. Our lives depend on refuse. On garbage. On decay. We can try to hide death and compost, but it is out of this manure that resurrection begins.

As you leave here today, remember the Manure Story. See where manure is happening in your life? Figure out how you can turn that manure into life, to fruit, to resurrection.

May I be so bold as to suggest that you become the resurrection.

Christ has no hands-on earth, no feet, no heart, no body other than us. We are the body of Christ. Now go forth from here and be that body, practicing resurrection even if our bodies still stink like manure!

~ Amen.

1. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/march/1032210.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)