**“Dunging the Fig Tree”**

April 6, 2025 5th Sunday in Lent Text: Luke 13:6-9

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Introduction to Scripture

Today we have one of Jesus’ parables, a very short one, but one which is incredibly rich in interpretation. I will read it to you twice, once from the King James version, and again from the New Revised Standard Version.

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I.

Our gospel text for today is one that, if you give it some attention, will likely grow on you.

Pity the owner of the vineyard. He is, above all, a man of business. It is not that he doesn’t enjoy the beauty of a well-tended orchard, not that he doesn’t pause now and again to smell the roses, but he has a family to feed, a business to run, a payroll to be met.

For three years he has been coming to the garden, for three years he has coming looking for the expected harvest, and for three years, *nothing*. He has been more than fair, more than patient. The tree was planted with the expectation that it would be what it was meant to be – fruitful. If it does not bear fruit, then it is an act of grace that it be chopped down and replaced with another tree, one which will bear fruit in abundance, and so nourish the world.

The meaning of the parable is quite plain – that we, just like the fig tree, are here for a purpose – we are to bear fruit worthy of the one who planted us here. We have been created by God for a purpose, and that purpose is to be more than oxygen-using, carbon-dioxide expelling, consumers of the world’s limited resources, shoppers in the earthly mall, pleasure-seeking recreation addicts.

In the beginning, in the first creation account, humanity is told to “be fruitful and multiply.” You have been created in my image, says God, and so bear fruit worthy of that.

Oftentimes people don’t think about what they are doing with their life, and whether or not it bears fruit worthy of the One who created them.

Their goal might simply be acquisition, money, property, more stuff. As the bumper sticker proclaims, “He Who Dies With the Most Toys Wins.”

The goal might be approval – approval of demanding parents, even long-after those parents are dead and buried, approval of the in-crowd, approval of a boyfriend or girlfriend, approval of the congregation one serves.

Or the goal might be enjoyment alone; the motto being “Live for today, for tomorrow we may die.”

There are as many ways to be fruitful as God desires us to be fruitful as the day is long, but we can start by embodying in our daily lives the love God has for us, and the love which is at the heart of the great commandment: that we love God and love neighbor with all our heart and soul and mind. And by remembering that love is not a sentiment, it is not a feeling – love, to a person of faith, is an action word. A mark of a fruitful life will be a life of service to others, of understanding that we have been blessed to be a blessing.

And so, Jesus is telling us in this parable that we are to be a fruitful people.

II.

The only trouble is, in a very real way Luke is not talking about *us* so much, at least not about us in isolation. We tend to put ourselves into the parable as the fig tree, as the object of all that attention from, first, the owner of the vineyard, and second, from the gardener.

And yet it seems that Jesus assigns a key role in his parable to the gardener. The message seems to be that we are to be gardeners in our own right, that we need to be ones working for the owner of the vineyard to make it bear fruit in its time.

Not such a far-fetched idea, of course, if we remember the story from the Book of Genesis, where Adam and Eve are placed in the garden, but not just to enjoy it, to kick back and marvel at is beauty and fecundity. No, Adam is placed in the garden with the command that he “till it and keep it”, that he help it be fruitful. (Genesis 2:15) And later, when Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, that task remains, that they till the ground from which they were taken. (Genesis 3:23)

I know many of you are true gardeners, and that you have forgotten more about gardening than I will ever know, but there is one thing that I have learned in my years of gardening around the home – real gardening is not for sissies. For the garden to really be fruitful, to be beautiful, to not just go to seed and become overgrown, the gardener has to put their back into it. You have to haul the mulch, you have to turn the soil, you have to battle the green briar, you have to lug the water sprinklers.

It is the same way in Jesus’ parable – the gardener says to the owner that in a last ditch attempt to make the fig tree bear fruit, he will dig around it.

Master gardeners will tell you that one way to bring back a nonproducing tree or shrub is to take a spade and ram it into the soil in a circle around the tree or shrub, a few feet out from the center. What this does is sever the over-spreading root system, forcing more of the plant’s energy into its foliage. It is hard, sweaty work jumping up and down on that spade.

But the gardener in the parable does not stop there. He also proposes to *dung the fig tree.*

The Greek word, politely translated by the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible as “manure”, and by the King James Version as “dung”, is a crude, impolite word, not for use in genteel conversation, and is found only this one time in the New Testament. I hesitate to use this word in such refined company as this, in such a stately building as this, but since Jesus said it first, maybe I can get away with it. Although, if I had told the parable, maybe I would have had the gardener say, “Master, permit me to apply a topical coating of Miracle-Glo, a handful of aluminum sulfate, and a bit of mulch”. But Jesus says, “Dung it!” Glop on that stinky manure. It has been three years, no time for half-measures.

Truth be told, we don’t much go in for manure. We’d rather avoid it. If we ever get to the point where we see that we as individuals are not being fruitful, where we can admit that we as a church are falling short of our potential, then we would just as soon do anything but get involved in that smelly dunging business. And so we take half-measures.

Pick up a self-improvement book; join a fitness club, but don’t sign on with a trainer who might keep us accountable; as a church, ask a Board or Committee to look into it, maybe even set up an *ad-hoc* task force to come up with some sort of plan. We sit around the table and brainstorm and then go home and get a good night’s sleep, telling ourselves we really are making progress.

But what if we really got into that dunging business? What would it look like for us as individuals, for us as a church, for us as a society? What if we got out of this pristine sanctuary and took our faith and our uncalloused hands and went down the road to Hyannis and worked to end the poverty which afflicts so many down there, if we found a way to get a handle on the housing crisis here, if we just got up to our hips in the manure-spreading business, that we might help be a part of the solution to some of the issues which plague us even here on scenic Cape Cod?

III.

But the only trouble is that this passage isn’t finally about how we are here to be fruitful, or about how we are entrusted with the mission of helping others be fruitful. It is finally just a story about one who loves us and forgives us and no matter our backslidings and failures and sheer cussedness, still gives us another year of grace, another chance at redemption.

Because, at bottom, this is just how God is. We know how *we* are – how despite everything, despite our continuing resolutions and our determination to do better this time, we are not as fruitful as we would like, and not as good at helping the rest of the world be fruitful as we would desire. We try to hide from this, but deep down, when we can finally be honest with ourselves, we know this is true.

We know how we are – *and we fear how God is*.

We fear that God is like that surprisingly troubling old fellow of holiday song who knows if we have been naughty or nice,

We fear that God is the unelected boss of a heavenly D.O.G.E, although with less money than his earthly counterpart, just itching to wield the eternal chainsaw.

We are afraid that God is like *us*, and will judge us and find us wanting, and in exasperation decree “Cut it down!”

But *this* is who God is, Jesus tells us. God is like the banker who simply refuses to call in the mortgage, like the government agency which keeps deferring that overdue student loan. God is like the owner of the penny candy store who says to the little boy who is a dime short, it’s on me.

Don’t ask me why. It’s a mystery. But there God is, leaving ever-peaceful Elysian fields to go slumming with us in a stable in that little town of Bethlehem, tramping the dusty roads of occupied Israel with a rag-tag group of former fishermen and tax collectors, going elbow-deep in the manure spreading business amid Pharisees and sinners and frail, backsliding people just like me and you, getting down on his knees to wash his followers’ smelly feet, even ending up on a hill at the town-dump outside of Jerusalem, nailed to a cross.

And then, finally, on that first Easter day, meeting Mary Magdalene in the garden, when she mistook him for – do you remember? – a *gardener*.

All so that you and I and this whole groaning-in-travail world can have one more day, one more month, one more year.

One more year to grow in strength and wisdom and spirit.

One more year to become more fruitful than you ever thought you could be.

One more year to help others ripen into the fullness of life God yearns for them to have.

One more year to share together at Christ’s table,

one more year to dance to Christ’s song of love,

one more year to know God’s abiding love and then share that love with family, with friends, with this community, with the world.

One more year. Thanks be to Christ, one more year. Amen.