

032022 "Cultivate the Soil of Daily Life" Luke 13:1-9

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. The scripture readings for the third week of Lent are a call to repent and return to the Lord. Today's reading is found in the chapters of the Gospel of Luke that describes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. During this journey, Jesus teaches and heals. Meanwhile, people gossip about two incidents in their neighborhood. Jesus warns people to change their ways, their ways that people easily condemn others. The fig tree story similar to today's is found in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Although Mark and Matthew describe the event that Jesus cursed the fig tree, today's text in Luke uses the fruitless fig tree as the subject of a parable.

Today's scripture reading is not an easy topic. Because words like these first come to our eyes: sin, perish, repentance, and cut it down. However, if we take a closer look at the word of Jesus, we can find the grace of God underlying this story. Saying "I'm sorry" a lot is not repentance. Repentance in the Bible has a clear purpose. That is forgiveness and restoration. And the reason that forgiveness and restoration can happen is because of God's love shown in Jesus' crucifixion.

Transforming a Stain

Sir Edwin Landseer was one of the most famous painters of the Victorian era. His talent developed early, and he had the first showing of his work at the Royal Academy when he was just thirteen years old. He was commissioned to do a number of official portraits of the royal family, and even gave private

drawing lessons to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. But he was best known for his depictions of the natural settings and life in the Scottish highlands.

One day as he was visiting a family in an old mansion in Scotland, one of the servants spilled a pitcher of soda water, leaving a large stain on the wall. While the family was out for the day, Landseer remained behind. Using charcoal, he incorporated the stain into a beautiful drawing. When the family returned they found a picture of a waterfall surrounded by trees and animals. He used his skill to make something beautiful out of what had been an unsightly mess.

God works in much the same way in our lives. The things that we think of as weaknesses and handicaps can, through God's grace, become our greatest strengths—and the very things God uses the most to bring glory to Himself. God's grace provides the strength to meet every challenge and overcome every weakness.

If we look at the Gospel of Luke today, Luke tells us some among the crowds report to Jesus a massacre of Galileans by Pilate. The intention of the crowd seems to be to ask Jesus to explain why these people suffered. More precisely, they already had the answer. Perhaps they were waiting for Jesus to confirm the answer they already had: "it happened because of their sin." Jesus, however, challenges this interpretation. Those who were slaughtered were no more and no less sinful than those who reported the situation to

Jesus. Jesus answers that even fatal accidents and natural disasters like the collapse of the tower of Siloam should not be interpreted as punishment for sin. Instead, Jesus reminds us that we all need to repent before God.

How often do people condemn others? There is a tendency to condemn, "The reason that something bad happened to that person is that that person has sinned more than others." However, as Jesus said today, such thinking is wrong. Jesus made it clear that the person who suffered bad things did not suffer these things because they were more sinners than others. The important point here is this: Stop judging and condemning others, but look back on yourself, repent and be forgiven.

The tone changes, however, in the parable that follows. Jesus tells us of the story of a fruitless fig tree. While reading verse 6, you may wonder why the fig tree was planted in a vineyard. The verse 6 says, "Then he told this parable: A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any." T. W. Manson, a theologian, explains: "In Palestine, people used to plant all kinds of fruit trees in a vineyard." Most fig trees in fact grew on the streets. So, a fig tree planted in a vineyard was receiving special attention and care.

It's easy to react to this story and think the owner was too harsh to chop off the tree just because it was fruitless. But apparently, a fig tree reaches maturity in its third year; so, a tree that is fruitless at the time most likely

can't bear fruit in the future, either.

The fig tree that received so much care and love from the owner failed to bear fruit for three years. When the owner orders the gardener to cut it down, the gardener asks for a little more time. The gardener wants to tend and cultivate the soil in the hope that figs may yet grow. The gardener is open to a different future for this tree, in spite of its present condition. Think about your own life, or the life of someone you love, in relationship to this story: What needs special tending? What will cultivate the "soil" of daily life so that new growth, new possibilities, might emerge? We can learn from this gardener about allowing for a different outcome, a new possibility.

When the gardener intercedes – as Jesus does with grace – the tree is given a chance. He has given the fig tree not what it deserved, he has given the tree what it needed. This opportunity was not given freely. Symbolically speaking, for this one-year opportunity, Jesus paid the price of dying on the cross.

Practicing Grace

Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker both had churches in London in the 19th century. On one occasion, Parker commented on the poor condition of children admitted to Spurgeon's orphanage. It was reported to Spurgeon however, that Parker had criticized the orphanage itself. Spurgeon blasted Parker the next week from the pulpit. The attack was printed in the

newspapers and became the talk of the town. People flocked to Parker's church the next Sunday to hear his rebuttal. "I understand Dr. Spurgeon is not in his pulpit today, and this is the Sunday they use to take an offering for the orphanage. I suggest we take a love offering here instead."

The crowd was delighted. The ushers had to empty the collection plates three times. Later that week there was a knock at Parker's study. It was Spurgeon. "You know Parker, you have practiced grace on me. You have given me not what I deserved, you have given me what I needed."

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, when we see people who have been through hard times, let's find out what we can do for them. And let's not forget to pray for them as well. And above all else, I hope and pray that we will draw closer to God in this season of Lent. This new day carries the potential for growth and new life in Christ Jesus. Fairfield Grace, May God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you and your family, and your business, and your studies, and with the lives of your children. Amen.