

## *Bear the Fruit of Repentance*



*Fig Tree* – photo by Naveedanjumkhan, Islamabad, Pakistan

Luke 13:1-9

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There's a saying in the Far East, *"If you throw a bone to a dog, the dog will chase after it; but if you throw a bone at a lion, the lion will attack you."* In our scripture today, Jesus, the great lion, leaps back at the ones throwing the bone. People asked him about a tower which fell in the Galilean town of Siloam, killing 18 people, and about faithful Jews killed by Pilate's soldiers right in the temple in Jerusalem. Why? People asked. Was God doing this in vengeance for sin; was it their own fault? This is a big question – but Jesus answers with one word: "No!" He sidesteps this thorny theological issue, and flips the question on its head. *"But if you don't repent, the same things will happen to you!"* His point is that no, these victims are NOT being punished by God. But we ALL need to turn around! Wake up! Repent! Come back in harmony with God's ways of integrity, moral character, spiritual depth, and self-giving love.

Jesus then tells a parable about a fig tree. For three years it has not produced any fruit. It's not a bad tree. It has lovely green leaves. It doesn't insult or attack other trees. But it takes up space without providing fruit. It's kind of a lazy couch potato, a twenty-something whose main activity is gaming, Tick-Tocking, and shuffling to and from the refrigerator. He's not a bad person and doesn't hurt anyone. But Zorba the

Greek would call him a 'manure factory.' After three years of this, what is a parent going to say? *"Throw him out of the house! Go get a job!"* But then a kind neighbor intervenes. *"Wait a minute. Don't give up on him. Let me give him a pass to go to the gym and I can give him a job offer from a friend. Let's see if he can get himself back together again."* God is like that neighbor, wanting each of us to flourish, to grow, to discover ways to be engaged, vital, and to live up to our potential. We're called to blossom into the people God intends us to be, to open our hearts and hands to the world. St. Francis called out to an almond tree: "Speak to me of God." And the almond tree blossomed...

So, are we bearing fruit? That's the core issue for Jesus – are we growing the spirit-seeds God has given us? Or are we that tree in the vineyard that hasn't grown a fig in the past three years? Are we producing love and joy to share with those around us? Jesus asks us not to hide our light under a bushel basket but to let it shine out for all to see. Become the abundant fruit tree we were born to be!

This parable is also about manure. (Yes, manure happens!) The owner of the vineyard notices that the fig tree has not produced for three years, and instructs the gardener to cut it down. The gardener says, hey, not so fast. Let me put some manure around it, fertilize it, to see if it will gain strength and bear fruit next year. If not, go ahead and cut it down.

I know about this directly. For me it's not about figs, it's about strawberries. Part of my backyard vegetable garden is planted with strawberries. The plants look healthy; they've spread across two of my raised beds. They flower in the summertime. But the strawberries themselves are pitiful; few, small, tasteless, and disappointing. I've given them notice: after I put compost on them this Spring, if they don't produce large, tasty fruit this summer, out they go!

The parable says that we're being put on notice by God. God sends us holy fertilizer, divine compost that invites us to grow in spiritual strength and self-giving love to produce fruits of grace and blessing. We're given limited time. If not, we're in trouble.

Let me share with you a story told by a pastor who served an inner-city New York church. He writes: *A young woman came to me one afternoon in the church's parking lot. She had a little boy in tow and wanted to know if we could talk. Sure. We sat on the hood of my Chevy and we talked.*

*We talked about her husband and the fact that he could be hard to get along with. I asked her what I could do to help and she told me, "I don't know yet, but I do thank you for listening."*

*I listened to her a few more times and one day she brought a friend who had the same problem. The friend's husband was even more out of control and was beating not only his spouse but his children. That night, I learned about domestic violence shelters and how overfilled they were and are. That woman had to go all of the way to upstate New York in order to find a place for herself and her children.*

*Over the weeks and months that followed, the group of women kept growing. On at least two occasions, I needed to find a shelter and couldn't. The local police were cooperative but there was a limit to what they could do. One night, I got a call to the hospital. We nearly lost one of the women.*

*The next day it really began. We decided to build our own shelter. There were about a dozen of us, me and 11 women. Every inch of the way, those faithful and courageous women led.*

*When I had no more hope and no more energy, they led and they encouraged. Through the beatings and the trauma they struggled within their own lives, yet they never lost sight of the community soul.*

*In the same year the shelter finally opened, it was discovered by one of the husbands and burned to the ground. The place was open a matter of weeks, and it was gone! I really gave up that time! The women didn't. They started to rebuild. Smarter and faster this time."*

We, as faithful people, are a community of growers and builders. We grow spiritual fruit, which we then give away to those who are hungry. We pull together – put on rummage sales, concerts, luncheons, pot-lucks, worship services. We visit the sick and grieving. We seek the common good, we share pain and hopes, we grow and rebuild; even in the face of tremendous loss and hardship. As things fall apart, we put them back together again. That is bearing the fruit of the spirit.

But what if we are just not in a position to be that active, to have time or health or energy to build shelters, or haul boxes or weed gardens or shovel manure? Some of us are not able to work nine to five, or even nine to nine-thirty. We may be disabled, or retired, or frail. But does that make us worthless? Should we be cut down? I've run into older people who confess, *"I feel worthless now. I don't know why God keeps me around. I can't work, or do the chores or run the house. I'm just a burden to everyone."* I can understand those feelings. We all want to feel useful. But this doesn't mean that if you are unable to work full tilt, you are worthless and should be cut down. Being useful spiritually can be very different than being a work-a-holic. God loves us as we are, and as we are able.

Look at Julian of Norwich, a contemplative nun living in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the town of Norwich, England. She lived out her days in a small cell on the side of a great cathedral, in prayer and contemplation. She became a nun, by going through a ritual of burial, placed in a grave to symbolize her dying to her old life and being reborn into the nunnery, and becoming a solitary contemplative. In her day, she was highly admired. She had a window in her cell out onto the street so that people from everyday life could come to ask her questions or to talk to her about their spiritual journey or suffering. This was a great help to many. She was a mystic, having visions and writing them down, and these revelations have been deeply valued for centuries. Her job was simply to pray. That was her vocation. Even though it didn't involve a lot of heavy lifting, this was her calling. And this is a vocation any Christian can claim.

We all can give. We all can be a tree that bears fruit. We can give of ourselves in multiple ways. This is how we repent to make our lives full and prosperous, blessed by God. One of the great mysteries of our faith is that by self-giving, we are blessed. As we give, we receive. The more we remain self-absorbed, taking up space but not giving, the more we remove ourselves from God. But when we bear and give away the sweet fruit of love and generosity, the more we discover God's spirit in our midst.

So, this Lent, let us repent. Let's turn around to come back into harmony with God's will. Let's grow in Christian character, in wisdom, strength, dedication, and caring. And then let's bear luscious fruit that we all can enjoy. Thanks be to God. Amen.