

Third Sunday of Lent "C" – Part 10

The Gospel for the third Sunday of Lent year "C" has fruitfulness as its theme. The man who planted the fig tree looks for fruit for three years but finds none. He is ready to cut the tree down, but the gardener convinces him otherwise. He promises to cultivate and fertilize the tree. He wants the owner to give it another year. If in that time no fruit is borne, by all means, cut it down. But if there is fruit, the tree will live. In Lent, we are being given time to produce and be fruitful.

Are you struck by the courage and audacity of Jesus when he preached. People are so fickle and easily offended. Jesus spoke the truth, in love, to all who would listen. This Gospel is yet another instance of Jesus being bold and clear. He did not mince words, and he was not a people pleaser. The religious leaders knew of Jesus' verve and tried to exploit it. Once when the Pharisees approached Jesus, they mocked their respect for him by saying: "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men." (Matthew 22:16). Once they spoke the truth about Jesus, they tried to trap him. But they still disclosed what everyone knew: Jesus did not try to win people's approval. He spoke the truth.

Jesus brought up the incident about those who were murdered and others who died in an accident. He said they were not any more guilty than anyone else. Yet, unless we repent, we will come to the same end. The scorching words of Jesus are a stern warning about moral repentance. The truth is, we simply do not know how much time we have. There are too many variables and too much unpredictability in our world. We must take advantage of the time we have and make the most of the opportunity of Lent. Fruitfulness in this instance means turning away from sin and demonstrating moral character.

The first command in the Bible is to be fruitful and multiply. Jesus tells us in another place that they who abide in him will bear much fruit. We read about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians. It is clear that God desires fruit from us. Obviously, we are not trees. We cannot bear figs or oranges or lemons. What is the fruit God is looking for?

We can bear fruit in many areas of life. First, God wants us to be fruitful in our relationship with him. Next, we are fruitful when we realize our potential and become the best we can be. We bear fruit when we live and share the Good News and reach out to others. In addition, the fruitfulness referred to here has to do with focusing on our moral life and character development. We do not have to go far in the Bible before we hear about our propensity for sin and the necessity that we change. The whole of the Bible is concerned with our fall, sin, and movement away from sin and towards God.

There is a stern warning here. We are reminded repeatedly during Lent that we must repent. John the Baptist, the prophets, and Jesus all taught us that we must turn away from sin and move towards God. While Jesus was gentle and a spellbinding teacher, he did not mince words when it came time to warning us about sin, death, and eternity. He taught: "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the day of the Son of Man." (Matthew 24:37). His initial proclamation was: "Repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:15).

We can reverse our destiny through our deeds. Now is the time to make sure that we are on the right track. God, through the prophet Ezekiel states: "If a wicked person turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live and not die." (Ezekiel 18:21). Ezekiel also teaches the reverse is true. We can jeopardize our good standing with God by sinning.

What makes Jesus' blatant warning even more poignant is that we are told the tree only has one year to produce, or it will be cut down. It is easy to be lulled into complacency. We can reason that "nothing that bad has befallen me" and so we give ourselves a license to sin. All throughout the Bible we are warned not to sin. Paul wrote about the sins of the Hebrews in the desert and how they died. What happened to them was a warning for us. He continues: "Let anyone who thinks they stand take heed lest they fall." (1 Corinthians 10:12).

The daily news can sober us up. There are earthquakes, hurricanes, plane and car crashes, as well as mass shootings. They always happen to someone else. Jesus forcefully tells us that we can have the same disastrous and quick end unless we change. We always think we have more time – that those things only happen to someone else, not us. It is pride that makes us think we are above the law. Lent is a time of urgency where we are encouraged not to put our repentance off. We do not know how long we may have. James tells us our life is like a mist. (James 4:14). In the scope of things, we are here today, and gone tomorrow.

The Gardener

One positive aspect of this story is the gardener. Rather than simply cutting the fig tree down, he is willing to work with it. He sees the tree's potential to bear fruit. He is willing to do the work of cultivating and manuring the tree. Lent is a time when we allow God to be at work in our life. God is the potter and we are the clay. God is the gardener ever at work watering us, pruning us, and fertilizing us. Through suffering, relationships, and untold circumstances, God is at work in our lives. Because of God's activity, we are being purified. Grace is at work.

If you have ever been around a farm, there are times of the year when the fields stink. If the wind is blowing the right way, the smell can be overwhelming. The unpleasant odor is from manure spread over the harrowed land to make things grow. Sometimes, God works in an harrowing manner with us. Other times, God's activity can be seen through stinky circumstances. In the famous story of the prodigal son, it was only when the disobedient son started slopping in the mud with the stinky pigs that he "came to his senses." We all have a natural aversion to smelling salts, but they do wake us up. Ever drive by a dump? Awful smells can get our attention.

We all have smelly, even stinky circumstances in our lives. It could be that contentious, aggravating person we need to forgive. Possibly there is a bottoming out experience that awakens us to the need for recovery. The guilt, shame, and despair of breaking our diet, or feelings that come from bad habits are smelly. Sufferings are hard but eye-opening. The difficult problems of life are not meant to defeat us but can define us. God knows how to make straight the crooked lines in our lives and he is at work making all things work for our good and for our benefit. God gardens us through the variety of people, circumstances, and sufferings in our lives. God's mercy is displayed in that he does not give up on us but works in us so that we will change. We must see the difficult things in our lives with a positive outlook.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the twin seven year old boys. One was an optimist, the other a pessimist. Worried that the boys had developed extreme personalities, their parents brought them to a psychiatrist for examination. The psychiatrist worked with the pessimist first. Trying to brighten his outlook, he took him into a room full of toys. The child began to complain because the toys he liked were not in the room.

Next, the psychiatrist took the other, optimistic child into a barn outside. The barn was full of stinky manure. Immediately the young man began to gleefully dig into the manure. "You cannot fool me. With all this manure there has to be a pony around here somewhere."

Look for the positive in your smelly circumstances. The good news is that God is at work. God is the gardener who cultivates and fertilizes us to be fruitful. The fruit God is after is our turning away from sin and developing a moral character.

There is an urgency for change here. One major point of the story is that no one knows how long they have to live. We heard about the pressing need to make a change on Ash Wednesday. We again hear the urgency being repeated in this Gospel reading. We do not know how much time we have. No one knows the day or the hour. No one is above the law. Whether you are a member of the elect, a candidate, or a baptized Christian, it is up to us to cooperate with grace now, before it is too late. It is time for us to make a move.

Lenten Lessons:

- How are you bearing fruit in Lent?
- Get in touch with the urgency to change
- God is a gardener at work in our lives
- Fertilizer stinks but brings growth

Lenten Action:

- Where do we need to make a move?

