

Fertilizing our Trees
Luke 13:1-9
Colebrook Congregational Church
February 28, 2016 / 3rd Sunday of Lent

The writer of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts is the largest single contributor to the New Testament. Put together, it is a sweeping historical epic, covering fifty years of history, where the other gospels cover only three months to three years. It starts before Jesus is born, at the Temple in Jerusalem, continuing through its destruction, and ending with Paul in Rome.

Each Gospel has a distinct flavor and shows Jesus in different lights. Luke's depiction of Jesus is the most compassionate of the Gospels, akin to a doctor, which is the flavor that this Gospel has.

Today's selection comes from a segment containing chapters 12 and part of 13, focusing "On the Responsibilities & Privileges of Discipleship." And our selection, specifically, is about repentance for sins. Reading the two parts together, I see a similar framework as those used in revivals millenia later, starting with graphic imagery to frighten, and then ending with reassurances.

The first time I read the first portion, verses 1-5, my reaction was, "wait, what?" I had to check into this, because this part is like listening to a speech on current events, without watching the news beforehand.

First, some context of what Luke is assuming that we already know, in chronological order. In Judaism, sacrifice is an important part of worship, but according to the Torah, sacrifices can only be performed in the Tabernacle until a permanent Temple could be constructed, and then only there. Nowhere else. A synagogue is NOT a temple.

This is also the main problem that the Judeans had with the Samaritans. After the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they removed a large portion of the population, spread them throughout their empire, and then replaced them with various peoples from all over their empire. Ever hear of the Lost Tribes of Israel? This is why they are lost. So, those who were transplanted into what was then renamed Samaria learned about being Jewish from those who remained. However, the Judeans in the Southern

Kingdom of Judah, where Jerusalem and the Temple is located, did not want a bunch of foreigners hanging around, so the Samaritans, if they wanted to make their own sacrifices, needed a different location. They choose Mount Gerizim, which was used as a holy site in the time before building the Temple in Jerusalem. That really rankled the Judeans, because their Temple was supposed to be the only place for sacrificing! This is also partly why the story of the Good Samaritan resonated with listeners back then.

And in come the Romans. After much frustration and insurrection, Rome issued a dispensation for Jewish worship to proceed without the pagan inclusions. However, the legionnaires in Palestine on edge all the time. The Judeans there were always rebelling! So much so that four entire legions were permanently stationed in Palestine. Never in the history of the empire had so many legions been needed to control so little land!

The Romans were anxious all the time and summarily killed people they just suspected of fomenting rebellion. And the two Temples were social centers for people to gather, speak, or sermonize, so they were perfect places to start a rebellion, if you were so inclined. So this how the blood of people ended up mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.

Apparently, this happened so often under Procurator Pontius Pilate, that both Jewish historian Josephus, and other Roman sources did not bother recording all the incidents; and it also led to the recall of Pontius Pilate just a few years after the crucifixion for mismanagement.

And then Jesus mentions another current event, where 18 people perished in an industrial accident on a construction site. That tower was part of the city fortifications, protecting one of the springs and reservoirs.

What Jesus is doing here is reminding His listeners, in graphic and current images, that they should heed the Call to repent before it is too late. Having frightened them, Jesus then brings them back with a reassuring parable about a fig tree. Just one note of context. Vineyards in Palestine are not quite what we imagine when we hear the word “vineyard,” as they also contained trees as well as vines. Another translator suggested “garden,” but I think “orchard”

would be a better choice in the imagery it evokes.

The message here is simple. A tree that is alive, but stagnating, if given the chance and the care that is needed through time and fertilizer, will provide fruit. So while the followers should repent soon, Jesus will have the love and patience to nurture us.

I see this message as being applicable to us in two forums. Individually, we are the trees, and Jesus is the Gardener, giving us the fertilizer that we need to grow, and to be productive. There have been times in my life where I have felt like I was stagnating. I was lost, unsure of what to do. So I turned to Jesus and prayed, and Jesus responded! I soon thereafter met someone, who introduced me to the National Association, so I switched denominations, and my life took off and started to feel alive again, and productive.

I asked my friends on Facebook about this, but because not all my friends are Christian, or even faithful, I reworked this into this question: What has convinced or motivated you to make a positive lifestyle change? While I did not mention Jesus, I am just assuming that Jesus is involved, after all, we do not always understand His methods.

Many responded that it was Love. Love for a significant other or a child to change self-destructive behaviors or improve one's health. There was also many who responded that it was forgiveness. Learning to let go of hate, anger, jealousy, and resentment, and feeling that weight just float away. One friend described that holding on to hate felt like "poison in my veins." Then there is loss of love. Some just said something along the lines of heartbreak, but one friend into more detail, sharing that her divorce had forced her to look at herself and see the person she had become and then realized that she did not want to be that person anymore. While not explicitly the actions of faith, I believe that they are still applicable, and the result is that their personal trees were able to grow and be productive.

In the other forum, we collectively, as us here in this church, are the tree; and then, as many of us are gathered together, I believe that it is the Holy Spirit who is the Gardener, fertilizing us all. It just happens that perhaps the best

example of this for our church is not something from our past to remember, but is what is about to happen today after the service. After we worship, and fellowship, we will be gathering together in a workshop, to discuss our ideas and plans for this church, and where we are to go together as a church. Whenever we gather together, the Holy Spirit is among us, so we must remember to be receptive to Her, and allow Her to move us in the way that we are meant to go. Because, if we are receptive, and if we faithfully do this workshop, and follow through with it, I am certain, that with patience, our church's tree will bear amazing fruits.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer.

Loving God, we thank You for Your patience with us, Your flawed creatures. May Your Spirit descend upon us, especially this afternoon as we gather to discuss our future as Your church. Help us to receive Your Spirit into our hearts and minds, allowing Her to guide us as You will, laying down the fertilizer around our fig tree, and giving us the time we need to let it seep into us, and revitalize us, and make us grow and produce fruits to your glory.

Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

Faithful God of love, You blessed us with Your servant Son so that we might know how to serve Your people with justice and with mercy. We gather the needs of ourselves and others, and offer them to You in faith and love, seeking to be strengthened to meet them.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

We pray for the forgiveness of sins known and unknown, for falling short of how we should be towards ourselves, towards our fellow humans, and to all of Your Creation. May we be reassured of Your forgiveness, so we may try to do better and make amends as we move forward.

We pray for everyone who needs Your help. For those who are unwell or wounded in mind, body, or spirit. We pray to be of assistance if we can, and for all those who have dedicated their lives to helping others. We pray to bring comfort to the lonely, shelter to the exposed and vulnerable, and nourishment to the hungry. May you fortify us to better serve you through our service to our neighbors.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We pray that we recognize your messengers and those You send to help us and redirect us for who they are, and that we show the wisdom to heed them. And we pray for the strength to resist the temptations in our daily lives and continue the Lenten sacrifices that we offer up to You.

We especially pray for:

Shape us and transform us by Your grace, that we may grow in wisdom and in confidence, never faltering until we have done all that You desire to bring Shalom to fulfillment. Amen.

Psalm 63:1-8

63:1 O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

63:2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

63:3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

63:4 So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

63:5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

63:6 when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

63:7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

63:8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Luke 13:1-9

13:1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then 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. So he said to the gardener, '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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"