

Sermon for Lent 3 – Parable of the Fig Tree - Luke 13:1-9

If any of you have ever planted a vegetable garden, you may be able to relate to the story I am about to tell. My first call was to a rural congregation in Normanby Township north of Kitchener-Waterloo. My first wife and I were city slickers arriving to a parsonage in the country and farmland as far as the eye could see. The church was next door and a large lot between it and the house. The first year there, we decided to plant a vegetable garden.

A member brought his tractor over to plow the grass under and then the planting began. We planted enough potatoes to feed an army. Why? I don't know. We were two people and a three-year-old. There were other things like carrots, corn, beets, and leaf lettuce. I picked up some sunflower seeds for Joel, my son, to plant. We planted a row along the front of the garden looking out to the road. Once everything was planted, we had a good load of stinky manure spread over the garden and we waited. It was very interesting to watch. Joel was very keen to see his sunflowers grow. They slowly broke through the surface. As they grew, he watered them, nurtured them and cared for them. Well, they got to four feet. The heads had started to show. Then six feet. Then ten feet. And eventually 14 feet! I didn't realize that I had bought giant sunflower seeds. It was awesome though. Joel entered the tallest one in the Neustadt Fall Fair, the big metropolis of 200 people where our very own Pastor David grew up. The entrance fee was one dollar. It was tricky getting the sunflower to Neustadt because it had to be in a bucket with the head still on. Joel was very proud to take home a two-dollar first prize for the tallest sunflower.

Today's gospel lesson is one that includes a lesson of growth and an opportunity for change. Let me start by saying in reflection of ourselves and the gospel sometimes we view the wrong doings we commit, otherwise known as sin, we view some sins as worse than others. We are quick to judge others when we should be focused on what we can control: our own actions.

At the beginning of our story today we hear the writer of Luke tell us that Pilate had killed some Galileans. The grisly mention of Pilate's mingling of the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices appears to refer to a massacre of a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem.

Then Jesus refers to a tower in the wall around Jerusalem when he speaks of "the tower of Siloam." Apparently, a structure collapsed without warning and crushed eighteen hapless Jerusalemites.

So, Jesus seizes on these two calamities that may have been subjects of recent conversation around the local watering hole—one an instance of state-sanctioned terror, one a random accident. Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no apparent reason. Both kinds of events lead the rest of us to realize how precarious our existence is. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong, nothing that caused their demise. He characterizes life as just as capricious as it is (to paraphrase Hobbes) nasty, brutish, and short.

Although these events might allow Jesus an opportunity to defend God against charges of mismanaging the universe, he does not go that route. Jesus only implies

that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not make atrocities come. They just come.

Life's fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims, and "why?" questions to address those of us who thus far have survived the hazards of the universe and human society. We should not mistake our good fortune as evidence of God's special blessing.

Jesus wants to talk about repentance. The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors. When Jesus says, twice, "unless you repent you will all perish" like the others did, he does not promise that the godless will be struck by an asteroid.

He does not promise freedom from calamity but urges his hearers against false self-assurances. If life's fragility demands urgency, that urgency shows that life itself has carved out opportunity for us to seize God's graciousness, as the parable of the fig tree suggests.

In the parable of the fig tree, the vineyard owner had been patient. The fig tree planted in the vineyard had not produced fruit in the first three years of its life. Fig trees were supposed to produce two crops. One at the beginning of summer and the other at the beginning of fall. What the owner forgot however, was that fig trees did not bear fruit usually until the third year. Frustrated by what he saw he instructed the gardener to cut it down because it was just wasting soil. The gardener asked for just one more year and if it does not bear fruit, you can cut it down.

What we never do hear is whether the fig tree ever bore fruit. It is not important. What is important is the fig tree is given more time.

It is the season of Lent, the season of confession and truth telling. And let's tell the truth in our own lives, in the life of this congregation, we haven't been as fruitful as we can be. And what does the master do to us in our unfruitfulness. God gives us time. There's always time for us to be better disciples and a better, more fruitful congregation. Now don't get me wrong. We are fruitful. There is just always room for more fruitfulness.

God makes promises to God's people throughout scripture. "I'll be your God and you'll be my people," or "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." God is faithful to God's promises. And yet here's my question: Why does God take so long to make good on God's promises?

The parable of the unproductive fig tree suggests to me that maybe God's takes God's time in order to give us more time. By not pulling the plug on the failed human experiment a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus we are given more time to come to terms with Jesus and to allow Him to come to terms with us.

Jesus commanded his followers, us, to go into the world, teaching and baptizing all nations (Matthew 28) to be shining lights to the world, demonstrating to the world what God can do when ordinary people obey Jesus showing everybody, everywhere the truth about God. We've needed more than two thousand years to be obedient and are still not there yet. Thanks be to God, there's still time.

God gives us a chance during this time as individuals and as a congregation to take a look at our own practices of faith. God invites us to look at our prayer practices. God invites us to think about our actions- not the actions of others – and recognize the places of imperfection. Recognize that all of us have a need to be truthful to ourselves and God. There is a need in all of us to “repent” or turn around from our wrong doings. Our God is a forgiving God. Our God in baptism has claimed us as his children. He has chosen to love us, cleansing us from our sin and giving us new life. It is in this new life that we live. Take time to revisit that place of baptism and what it means to you. How are you responding to the great love we have been given in baptism? How are you responding to the great love Jesus showed us dying on the cross for our sins and in his resurrection?

Like the fig tree, God is giving us time to change. To turn around from sin. To respond to his love with action. It is a time to reset. It is a time to refocus our vision. It is a time for us to do some self-evaluation. Where is it that we can live the gospel at church, at home, in the world? What seeds are you willing to plant?

Returning to the sunflowers that Joel planted let me tell you the end of his story. When the summer was over, we cut off the massive sunflower heads and dried the seeds. Yes, we roasted some of them. With the others though we bagged them up in lunch baggies and sent them to family far away. We gave them to friends. We saved some to plant next year. We challenged everyone to grow the tallest sunflower. What Joel learned in doing this was that seeds can grow anywhere. They can bring joy to many. I don't think he understood this side of things, but when I look at that experience

and frame it around God's love, how powerful an image is that. God has planted a seed in us, the Holy Spirit, a Spirit of love. The Holy Spirit grows in our hearts and it's our job to share that love of God with others. Who knows where the seeds of love will land? My hope is that others might experience what we experience here at Zion and in our faith. For God is good. May God bless you during this season of lent, this time of change. Amen.