

Sermon for February 28, 2016
Luke 13:1-9 Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior.
Amen

In our gospel text for this morning, Jesus finds himself being questioned about the connection between sin and suffering. Jesus wastes no time in telling his questioners that God doesn't operate as they're suggesting...God does not go around punishing people for their sinful activities by making them suffer or causing them to die. That being said, Jesus also tells his questioners that they themselves had better turn their lives around as soon as possible because none of them knows when death will come and cut their lives short.

To underscore his advice, Jesus tells his listeners a story about a fig tree that had failed to produce fruit for three years. Though conventional wisdom would have dictated that the tree be cut down and replaced with a new one, the gardener of the vineyard asked the owner to give the tree another year. During that time, the gardener promised that he would help the tree by tending to its soil and providing fertilizer. "Give it a little more time. Let's see what happens before the tree is cut down."

Now over the years, this little story has been interpreted in a variety of ways. What makes most sense to me, especially in light of the urgency with which Jesus told his questioners to turn their lives around, is to suppose that God is the gardener and we are the fig tree.

In effect, this little story says to each of us that the time has come to bear fruit. The time has come to attempt to be the productive trees that God created us to be. The time has come to do more than simply occupy space.

Life is short, and because life is short there's a sense of urgency that needs to be recognized. Whatever time each of us has left is a gift...a gift that dare not be wasted. God, the giver of life, has a vested interest in us and has promised to be of assistance in helping us bear fruit. Who we are matters! What we do matters! How we love God and serve our neighbor matters!

I think that's at the heart of this morning's celebration of Bread for the World and other organizations and movements like it. It's all too easy to sit back and watch the world go by...without lifting a finger or contributing one thin dime toward the goals which Jesus set forth in what we've come to call his "Nazareth manifesto." Clearly, Jesus had the expectation and the hope that each of us would follow his example in bringing good news to the poor, in proclaiming release to the captive, in opening the eyes of the blind, in freeing the oppressed and in announcing the Lord's favor to all.

Groups like Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, Lutheran Partners in Global Ministry, ELCA World Hunger, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and a host of others...all of these groups understand that time is of the essence...and that what we do now for our neighbor matters. Bearing fruit matters!

Jim Wallis, the leader of the Sojourner's movement, has written of the transformative power and the personal sense of urgency which came to him as a young man from reading, for the first time, Jesus' words in Matthew 25: "I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

In his recent book entitled "On God's Side," Wallis notes that he hadn't remembered any (specific) reference to that Scripture reading in his entire church upbringing. "But there it was," he writes, "and as I read it over and over again, it astonished me...and then it converted me...(I somehow understood that)...the transformative power of (Jesus' words) is not just in learning to avoid judgment, but in changing priorities, changing perspectives, changing lives and even changing nations."

For Wallis, it was Jesus' call to focus his energy and his compassion "on the least of these" which brought new growth to the fig tree of his life. Matthew 25 was just the fertilizer...just the manure...that his tree of life needed.

"In my case," he writes, "it brought my faith back to life. The journey of Matthew 25 has led me to the inner city of Detroit, caused me to focus on the rural villages in Southeast Asia, called me to live in the urban neighborhoods of Chicago and the poorest and toughest neighborhoods of Washington, DC, and taken me to the war-torn countries of Central America, the rice paddies and brothels of the Philippines, and the segregated townships of South Africa. It has brought me to the poorest precincts and racial districts, the most dangerous neighborhoods, and the "bush" areas of the cities and countries I have traveled to all over the world. Every place has changed my life in some way. Every new relationship has its own revelations about the meaning of following the One who tells us to go into those places."

Well, obviously, not every of us is a Jim Wallis or has the calling to do what he has done with his life. But, each of us is called to bear fruit to the best of our ability. Each of us is called to do what we can. We may not be terribly effective, but we're called to be faithful. Organizations like Bread for the World, Amnesty International, Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light, the St. Peter Area Food Shelf, and the St. Peter Children's Weekend Food Program provide opportunities for each of us to go far beyond the walls of our own homes in order to love God by serving our neighbor.

Whatever you feel called to do, dear friends, it's clear that time is ticking away. None of us knows when our life will end. But between now and then, it's time to get our lives in order. It's time to bear fruit. It's time to let Christ's love and grace change the way that we "fig trees" grow.

This morning, as you wonder what it might look like for you to bear fruit, as you reflect upon Christ's invitation to serve others, as you intentionally attempt to engage your neighbor in acts of kindness, please remember, that your efforts are important. Your ministry is important. Your involvement in discipleship is important. The fruit you bear, however meager or inconsequential it might seem, is important.

Well, that's my pep talk for the morning. Let me leave you with a somewhat usual blessing:

May God the gardener attend to your needs, provide nutrients for the roots of your soul and cause your limbs and branches to burst into blossom...so that you might bear fruit in abundance.

In Christ's name, Amen