

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
March 7, 2010 C

Exodus 3:1-15
Luke 13:1-9

Let us pray.

God of new beginnings, You are the ever-patient gardener who nurtures our dried branches and strengthens our withering roots in the water of your love and the food of your compassion. Bind up our broken spirits in your grace and sustain us in your love so we can again realize a harvest from our life's struggling fig trees. Amen.

As a young boy, I spent quite a bit of time with my grandfather and learned an awful lot about life while with him. Among the seeds he planted in me was a love of gardening, so much so, that in the early years of marriage and while our older son was an infant, I'd spend as much time as possible 'playing in the dirt' often with Jeff in a child backpack looking over my shoulders. The men in my neighborhood depended on me each winter to borrow a pick-up truck from a friend, so we could go to a nearby horse farm to get the best manure for our garden beds. And, if that weren't enough, I had my own compost pile – and the rituals to go with it. It would get really smelly in the summer heat and I sometimes had to hold my breath when I took my pitchfork to mix all the “stuff” on the top into the compost, so that the hundreds of worms could work their magic. And then, on a cold late winter/early spring day, I'd take the compost apart, carefully placing the rich black humus into the garden beds and start the process all over again!

There's something about working with dirt, seeds and bulbs I find enjoyable. And yes, even manure! I've learned through the years that taking time to till the soil is one of the most important things a gardener does. Long before the seeds are planted and long before one can expect any fruit or vegetables, a good gardener patiently works the soil.

The Parable of the Fig Tree we hear today is one of the many stories Jesus tells to reveal to us who God is. God is like a patient gardener willing to take the time to cultivate barren souls who, for whatever the reason, are not bearing fruit. Where others see judgment and condemnation, the Patient Gardener sees opportunity and second chances.

The Parable of the Fig Tree is really about repentance and conversion, about turning and rearranging our lives and living more authentically as God calls us to live. Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable in response to questions people had about whether or not suffering and death was punishment for sin. The Galileans that Pilate instructed his soldiers to destroy during a demonstration against the Roman government, and the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them were examples used by Jesus to illustrate that unexpected death and suffering is not divine punishment for sin anymore than being spared from tragedy or sickness or sudden death is automatically a sign of divine favor. Bad things happen to good people, as we

know all too well. But this isn't what this fig tree story is about. The point Jesus makes in today's gospel is that NO ONE – No One, is exempt from the call to repentance. All of us need to hear and take to heart the call to repent and believe more deeply in the good news of Jesus – and that we should not delay making changes in our lives we know we need to make. And the changes you need to make in your life are probably different than the changes the persons next you need to make, or the changes I need to make in my life.

Tilling our garden is a good metaphor for Lent. Lent is a season for renewal, for changing patterns and habits which keep us from living more fully the life God calls us to live. The Word of God reminds us again and again that our past failures and lack of response to God's grace need not produce a barren future if we are open to God's grace and willing to do something about it NOW. God gives us second chances, but we don't know when the time of accountability will come. We never know when our time is up.

When things are going well in our lives, it's easy to say to ourselves, "I'll do it later...I'll tend to my spiritual life, my relationship with God, and make some changes when I get the time to do it...maybe next year?" Coasting along in life without examining ourselves to see whether or not we are living fruitful lives is something which can easily happen to all of us. Thinking we are exempt from the disasters and tragedies we see in the news is akin to the people in Jesus' time who felt they were saved simply because they considered themselves to be moral and religious people. They didn't feel any need to examine and change their lives and didn't pay attention to any call for repentance and conversion. Jesus challenges us, like he did them, to consider on what that security is based.

God is patient. And God is unpredictable. Like a gardener who sees not just the fruit we can bear but the hidden potential found in the tiniest of seeds, God offers us new opportunities to receive the gift of grace to grow and bear fruit. God can and often does fertilize our lives in ways we often can't imagine. It's just that when bad things happen to us, it's hard to see or feel the work of God the Patient Gardener in our lives. I'm reminded of a proverb I know is very true because I've experienced it for many years in my own life. I can't quote it verbatim, not because I don't know it by heart but because I'm not comfortable saying it in the pulpit. So here's the pulpit version: "All 'stuff' turns to fertilizer. It's the waiting time that gets smelly."

If God is patient like a gardener, God is also unpredictable. God calls out of a burning bush and reveals to Moses who God is: a God who enters into our lives and our history – a God who knows our suffering and hears our cry for help, even when we feel helpless and wonder whether or not the Patient Gardener cares. Tilling the soil of our spiritual lives opens the way to absorb the Word of God which comes in surprise-filled, unexpected ways in our daily lives.

We don't know in the Parable of the Fig Tree what happened a year later. Did the tree bear fruit? Jesus never tells us. Like so many of his parables, Jesus raises questions which can only be answered in the hearts and actions of his listeners. And so it is with our own lives, as well.

We really don't know exactly what sort of fruit our lives might bear a year from now or 15 years from now or even 20 or 30 years from now.

What we do know from the Parable of the Fig Tree, however, is that the opportunities God gives us today may not be available to us tomorrow.

Amen.

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