

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 23, 2025**

**“Planted in His Vineyard”
Luke 13:1-9**

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Our Gospel Lesson opens with a disturbing account of political violence: “At that very time,” Luke writes, “there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (v. 1). We don’t have more details than that, but it seems that Pilate—who was notorious for his brutality (cf. Tiede)—had ordered a massacre of Jewish pilgrims.

And though we don’t know the background, the way Jesus reacts tells us that people were treating this tragedy—and another, the collapse of a building—were treating these tragedies as if the victims were to blame. And to that, Jesus says: no. “Do you think,” Jesus asks, “that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you [...]. 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” (vv. 2-3).

It seems that people had been looking at these victims with the pointed fingers of blame: ‘they must’ve done something to deserve it,’ that sort of thing. This way of looking at misfortune, it’s calloused—but it’s also comfortable. ‘They’re to blame,’ onlookers can say; ‘they’re guilty; they should have repented.’ And to that, Jesus again says: no. Against anyone trying to put all the blame and guilt on others, Jesus says: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish [just] as they did” (vv. 3, 5).

Ooof. You can feel the awkwardness, the discomfort. It seems that people had been using tragedy as an excuse to blame others. But Jesus rejects that; and not only does Jesus deny the connection between tragedy and blame, but he also makes clear that the ones who need to repent aren’t they and them but we and us. The ones who need to turn, and return, to God? That’s us.

“Then [Jesus] told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none’ (v. 6). This seems straightforward enough: there’s a fruit tree that’s fruitless—and in a region where fertile land was

a precious resource, this tree is using up valuable soil: a fruitless tree is a waste of dirt.

In that situation, what would you do? If you planted flowers, some perennials that never bloomed; or you planted raspberry bushes, but they never produced any raspberries; after years of this, what would you do? You'd get rid of them, right? Why bother fussing around with some fruitless plant; that's a waste of time and resources, right? And that's exactly what the landowner wants to do: Jesus says, "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?'" (vv. 6-7).

For any reasonable or sensible gardener, the next step is obvious: uproot it, and plant something else... But the gardener in this parable is anything but reasonable and sensible: "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'" (vv. 8-9). This gardener knows the tree intimately; he's the one who takes care of it and waters it. He knows full that this tree is fruitless...

And yet, even though this gardener knows the tree's failings better than anyone else, he is strangely hopeful about this tree. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, this gardener is convinced that this scrawny little tree still has a shot; he's convinced that this tree can be renewed. He doesn't look at this tree and see a failure; no, he looks and sees a struggling tree that deserves a second chance. This gardener is certain that, with a little care and tending, this tree will yet bring forth fruit; this gardener believes in unseen fruit, welling up within the heart of that tree.

This parable is about repentance, and—if we learn anything from the uncomfortable first part of the Gospel Lesson—now's not the time to dwell on other people's failings, but instead to consider our own. We are in Lent, a long season for self-examination and for honesty; so it's good to acknowledge that, in this parable, we are that scrawny tree. St. Paul speaks about "the fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). That's nine; how many do you think your life is producing? For me, I'm gonna say...six-ish? And no, I'm not telling you which ones!

In this parable, the one to watch is the gardener; because in this gardener, we glimpse the compassionate and merciful patience of God. This gardener wants the tree to thrive and flourish—and he just won't give up on it. Notice how active

this gardener is: the gardener isn't just gonna wait and see; he wants to fertilize and aerate and water it—really, he wants to do whatever it takes to give this tree a chance. To anyone else, it might seem like a hopeless longshot; but that doesn't seem to bother the gardener, who just loves the hope that comes with a second chance.

When I was in high school, I was part of the environmental club, called “FROGG” (which stood for Friends Reaching Out for Greener Growth). One thing we did was take care of plants all over the school. I can only hope that young people today are a bit more refined, but—at least back in the early 2000s—teenagers did some horrible things to plants. So we had to dedicate one particularly isolated bay window to serve as a plant hospital: when students uprooted plants or ripped their leaves off or poured cola all over them, we would take in those plants and nurse them back to health. We actually had a budget to buy new plants, so we could've easily replaced them; and yet, the volunteers chose to tend diligently to those sad little scrawny plants... Looking back, I guess we really believed in what those plants could still become; we didn't want to give up on them—we wanted to give them a second chance to live and flourish.

You know, I think we tend to give up on each other too easily; we tend to give up on ourselves too easily, too. I think we're too quick to see ourselves, and each other, as a lost cause. But not so with God, who—it turns out—believes in us far more than we believe in ourselves: even when we seem fruitless or hopeless, God looks on us with the patience and compassion of that unreasonable gardener. In our parable, the gardener is outlandishly dedicated to that tree—and yet, in Christ, God is immeasurably more dedicated to us. God in Christ is the gardener who was willing even to lay down his life to save scrawny little trees like us.

Lent is a time for self-examination and honesty—but it's also a time for action. We can only self-examine for so long before we realize what we need to do, or stop doing, to become more faithful, and more fruitful—people. This is world is broken and hurting and misguided—and this world needs us to bear the fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

This isn't ever easy, but we shouldn't be discouraged: we're that scrawny tree, yet God in Christ believes in us far than we believe in ourselves; God is that unreasonably dedicated gardener, who nourishes us and gives us another chance. When we accept God's invitation to mend our ways and draw near to God, we know that the patient gardener is tending to us even now.

The parable concludes with the gardener asking for that second chance, promising to do everything he can to help that tree grow...but you know, we're never told the end of this story: "Sir, let it alone for one more year," says the gardener, "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" (vv. 8-9)—and that's it. There's no next chapter, no part 2; this story is never resolved...

Yet I like to think that the scrawny little tree was no match for that unreasonably dedicated gardener; and so that tree grew, and bore fruit, and became the tree the gardener believed it could yet become—not because of anything special about that tree, but because the gardener simply would not give up on it. Thank God. Amen.