



Sunday, March 23, 2025

Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-9

"Ma-nure"

Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

[Prelude: Kelly, a waitress from Monk's Café, flirts with George. At Jerry's goading, he takes her out for a walk.

George describes how he likes the word "manure", and Kelly makes a casual remark revealing that she has a boyfriend. Later, Jerry and George speculate whether she made that up to avoid George and whether the manure comment had anything to do with it.]

I wanted to start out with something light because the rest of what we're talking about is serious – I might even say, deadly serious. The issue on the table today is repentance. Not repentance as a 180-degree turn away from sin and toward God, as some think, but repentance as a change of heart -- a change of mind, a prayer for God's Spirit to be renewed in us, just as we sing in Psalm 51: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Yet this is not a mild-mannered issue. It is one of the utmost seriousness. Jesus makes this clear today. Without repentance we are in the same grave danger that those Galileans found themselves, who were randomly killed and their blood mingled with animal sacrifices. Without repentance we risk being vulnerable to catastrophe as were those crushed by the tower of Siloam when it randomly fell. None of those did anything to deserve what happened to them.

For us, though, if we do nothing we face not a physical death as they did but a spiritual death. Doing nothing makes us vulnerable to random forces that can mislead us, suffocate us, crush us, drain the life out of us. IF we do nothing. IF we do not stir our hearts to be changed and pray that the Spirit will work on us. Jesus says this himself: "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

The parable of the fig tree helps shock us into this awareness.

A man has lovingly planted a fig tree in his vineyard. We imagine he selected it for its fine shape and good potential. He instructed the gardener on how to care for it. Once a year he came to inspect its progress, hoping it would be producing fruit. The first year, nothing. The second year, nothing. The third year, nothing. The man's impatience boiled over. Enough of this! My time and resources are being wasted on this unproductive tree. Cut it down!

We have all probably had times in our lives when we felt unfruitful. One dull day leads into the next. Your work has become a crushing routine. You grind away without any sense of momentum. You feel unproductive and stuck. Abandoned and alone. What difference in the world are you making? What happened to all the plans you thought God had for you? Isn't that what the scripture tells us? (It isn't, actually.) And for that matter, where is God, anyway?

But we are not alone. We have not been abandoned. God does not desire our spiritual death. God is there as God has always been, waiting for the dark wall of separation to dissolve so that we can be restored into God's presence. What evidence do we have that this is so? God's own Son, who has already interceded for us. In his death and resurrection Christ has already led us

into the fullness of life. We were misled by other voices and became lost. Repentance is about realizing this and returning to the fullness of the blessings with which God's Spirit showers us.

In this state, the parable of the fig tree gives us everything we need. God allows the tree one more year to be fruitful. To that end the gardener provides abundant fertilizer, fragrant manure, and also does the hard work of enriching the soil around the roots. How loving is the work of the gardener! For us!

Who is your rich fertilizer? Think about your life. Who has helped you to discover or remember your true identity in Christ? Who has reminded you of God's love? Who has seen you through difficult times and pointed you toward a future you had either forgotten about or never realized you had? Who has made it possible for you to explore new avenues of activity and creativity? The names are coming to you. So yes, there is some very good ____ manure around you. Just look around this in this room, if you need more evidence!

And the best news is: Time is actually not of the essence. Here in the parable the gardener asks for one more year, but there is no timeline on Spirit's desire to come into our hearts and change them. Repentance is like a Groundhog Day of good news: Every day we wake up wondering 'now what,' and every day God finds new ways to remind us of his presence and our role in bringing in the kingdom.

Here's a good example. Thursday afternoon, a few hours before the Soup Supper, I was in my office. The phone rang. I was reluctant to answer because it wasn't a local area code and the caller ID was unknown. I have to admit my "Hello?" was halfhearted. On the other end was a person named Robert who said he had seen our outdoor sign, "Nutritious meal every Thursday," He said, "This is just the kind of thing I and my buddies have been looking for. We want to volunteer somewhere that we can make a difference. "Oh boy," I said, "We really need you! We always need more help! Please come!"

But Robert didn't say when, and I wondered if he'd follow through. At 5 p.m. that night I realized our volunteer numbers were way down. Usually we have 7 or 8, but as it turned out there were only three – Lou, Linda, and Sharon from Faith Lutheran who was about to have major back surgery. Just when I was wondering how we'd make it, Robert showed up – friendly, engaging, strong, energetic. Suddenly Linda pointed out in amazement, "He's already washing dishes!!"

What might have been a day of despair turned into a well-watered, well fertilized evening of wonderful fellowship.

What if discouragement had consumed us? We can't continue this so short-handed. On another recent Thursday, while we normally host 15-20 guests, we had only three. What if we had thought, it's not worth all this effort for so few people? What if we'd just called it quits for either of those reasons?

God is always there, the living Christ is always present and active, the Spirit is always moving to bring new life, if only we remember to be aware. Our other readings today remind us that we need to cling to this spiritual need in the midst of whatever darkness we find ourselves in, especially when we feel as if we've lost our way.

In Psalm 63, the word translated as “soul” actually means “throat” in Hebrew. I am parched in this dry and weary land! My throat thirsts for you! Then we remember God’s never-ending love for us, and how even in the driest and most barren season we are restored when we open being to the living waters of God’s presence.

Isaiah reminds us that spiritual renewal is available to us all, regardless of wealth or stature: “HO! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters! You that have no money – come, buy and eat!”

And finally 1 Corinthians warns us against the idolatry that can lead us away from these living waters, and that God through Christ will always give us the strength we need to return to him.

So even when the darkness appears to be closing in, do not give up. Do not despair. Cling to that endless promise of rich manure, spread well, that nourishes your roots and will restore you to life. “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain me with your bountiful spirit.”