

**Sermon: February 28, 2016 (Lent III) – Luke 13: 1-9**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

I am *not* the person you would choose to give a talk on agriculture or horticulture.

It's not that I have no interest in it, it's just that the experience I have fits the category of manual labour rather than technical expertise. If the work requires a pitchfork, wheelbarrow, shovel, rake or hoe I am your man but if you're needing something done with a hand cultivator or trowel – or something requiring actual thought or knowledge - you'll need to ask my wife or my son. I'm a fairly quick study when given the task of weeding a garden – within a few minutes I'll accurately identify which are the weeds we want rid of, and which are the plants we're wanting to grow – but your guess is as good as mine when it comes to actually naming the weeds I have just wrenched out of the ground.

This much I do know, however. When you are in the business of trying to grow something that will actually give you produce, whether it's a row of carrots or a strawberry patch, you need to maximize or add the factors that support and encourage growth; and minimize or remove the factors that suppress growth.

I don't know how expert an audience Jesus was speaking to when he shared the parable of the fig tree. By this point in his ministry he was roaming from town to town, and his audience would have been everything from fisherfolk to artisans, from shepherds to merchants. Regardless of their background I'm certain that the message would have struck home to some degree. Hear the words one more time, from a translation designed for dramatic reading called *The Voice*:

A man has a fig tree planted in his vineyard. One day he comes out looking for fruit on it, but there are no figs. <sup>7</sup>He says to the vineyard keeper, "Look at this tree. For three years, I've come hoping to find some fresh figs, but what do I find? Nothing. So just go ahead and cut it down. Why waste the space with a fruitless tree?"

<sup>8</sup>The vineyard keeper replies, "Give it another chance, sir. Give me one more year working with it. I'll cultivate the soil and heap on some manure to fertilize it. <sup>9</sup>If it surprises us and bears fruit next year, that will be great, but if not, then we'll cut it down."

What his audience would have known then, is what "Mr Not Quite Born With A Green Thumb" knows today: fruit trees take quite a bit of care and significant inputs in order to bear fruit, and if you've got limited land and a tight profit margin, you can't wait forever for an unproductive tree to prove its worth. There does come a time when you need to move along, hence the debate between the owner who has lost patience, and the gardener who negotiates one more year of hard-core cultivating and fertilizing before giving up on the tree altogether.

What his audience may or may not have known about fig trees, is three unique characteristics that enhance this parable quite a bit. A Lutheran Pastor in Yuma, Arizona named Brian Stoffregen has a terrific online commentary named CrossMarks, and I'm in his debt for much of this information. First off, the owner is not being hasty by ordering that the tree be cut down after three unproductive years because in reality, it would have been at least five years. Apparently, fig trees require quite a bit of patience – three full years before they produce their first fruits – so a commercially-grown fig tree that didn't produce anything in years three, four or five would indeed have been on borrowed time. Second, fig trees are noted for being rather aggressive in getting what they need from the soil, to the extent that other surrounding plants have a hard time competing with them. If there is moisture or nutrients available in the soil, you can count on a fig tree sucking it away from its neighbours. By offering to dig around the roots and heap on the manure, the gardener is going well above and beyond what would be expected relative to this species of tree. And third – a point I learned from Shannon – fig trees need extremely specific assistance when it comes to pollination. Unlike some fruit trees, whose pollen moves

around with just about any old insect flying from tree to tree, the fig flowers are completely encased by the fig and the only being that is capable of pollination is a tiny little wasp that lives within the flower. Without that one specific helper, pollination is not going to happen.

Even with my scant knowledge of horticulture, this parable draws me to the notion of bearing fruit, or being fruitful, and the time imperative to make sure that fruit is borne while it is still in-season. "Fruitful" is a very full, descriptive word, because it separates out our modern love of being busy, from the bottom-line measures of whether that busy-ness actually produced anything useful. Especially during the season of Lent, when we are encouraged to do some hard assessments about our lives, keeping that which is working and changing that which is not, the question of fruitfulness is a good one to ask ourselves.

In the first generation after Christ, this question of fruitfulness was a live question, partly because of the cost of discipleship in those days. If Rome heard of a Christian gathering, especially a group that was doing subversive things like telling women and slaves and foreigners that their lives actually mattered, there would be arrests and crucifixions so you had to be pretty sure that what you were doing was worth it. In the 5th chapter of Galatians (verses 22-23), the apostle Paul names these 9 fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

At its most basic level, then, as we approach this parable of the fig tree and what it calls us to examine in our own lives, we have this check-list of sorts. In my life, how evident are these qualities, how fruitful is my life? As I let these words wash over me, which ones would people recognize in me, and which ones need further cultivation? **Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.** That may not sound like a very fierce list, especially for those of us who link our connection to Jesus Christ with an edgy commitment to social justice, but it's a more difficult, counter-cultural list than you might think. In a society increasingly ruled by the first thing someone blurts out, having the patience to assess a situation with kindness kind of stands out. In the midst of political discourse that is getting louder and more selfish by the moment, as US Presidential hopefuls yell at each other and as the significant challenges to our oil-dependant economy have really challenged civility in our province and nation, the value of self-control, peace and love rise to the top. While we might want a list that gives us a bit more edge, this list of what it looks like when our trust in the loving power of Jesus Christ bears fruit, is worth paying attention to.

But when Jesus was speaking to that group way back when, he was not just talking about their lives as individuals. Yes, he challenged each listener to mend their ways, to actually demonstrate their devotion to God in the way they treated one another, but he was also pointedly challenging the religious establishment to repent, to turn around and find a new, more fruitful path.

Consider the seemingly unconnected words that came just before this parable. A member of the crowd brings news of a group of Galileans – people from the same part of the country as Jesus and his disciples – who had been slaughtered by Pilate while in the act of worship. Then Jesus himself related some news of the day, of a bunch of workers who had been crushed in an industrial accident in Jerusalem. In both cases, the religious folks of the day were tempted to blame the victims: God must have had some reason for the worshippers to be murdered, there must have been something in God's plan that caused those workers to die. And in both cases, Jesus says (a) nonsense! One was an act of Roman cruelty, the other was pure tragedy - and (b) if you really think that God is going to hurl lightning-bolts at you when you are being unfaithful – then you'd better duck now, all of you, because your behaviour is hardly what we'd call "stellar". Jesus challenges them as a group to repent – literally, to turn around, to keep reversing course as needed – before it is too late.

Bishop Robert Schnase of the United Methodist Church picks up on this notion that fruitfulness is something that we demonstrate corporately, not just individually, in a book entitled *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. While I find that his book walks on the edge of perfectionism, he definitely has a point to make. From his experience as a Minister and supervisor of Church life, he has identified five ways that you can tell when a congregation is as fruitful as it could be. These five practices of fruitfulness are:

- ✓ Radical hospitality
- ✓ Passionate worship
- ✓ Intentional faith development
- ✓ Risk-taking mission and service
- ✓ Extravagant generosity.

As we look at ourselves as a congregation – or for those of you visiting with us today, as you consider your Christian community back home – there's no way we could say that we are producing maximum harvest in all of these, yet I experience this congregation as nothing short of vibrant. In a land where many Churches are dwindling, where there is no sign of life or love when you walk into the sanctuary, I love what it going on here, and I celebrate the contributions of long-time members and brand-new members like the seven we welcomed this morning. There are wonderful signs of life in this place. But if I could take one of these five areas and single it out for attention, it would be that third one: intentional faith development, and on this one I am going to offer something half-way between an invitation and a plea.

We have lots of study materials here at the Church – some that have been used before, like the *Animate: Faith* video-based series we did last year at this time, or Tim Scorer's study series based on the works of Marcus Borg. We also have a brand-new series produced by the folks at Living The Questions entitled "The Jesus Fatwah" with the sub-title, "Love your Muslim Neighbour as yourself." And we're on the cusp of re-evaluating our Sunday School curriculum, gathering a few samples of other materials that can augment our use of Godly Play resources. We have these things, but need some support in order to get things pollinated and fruit-bearing. If you've got some skills and motivation in these areas, speak with me after worship, or give me a call or email. A number of researchers – historian Diana Butler Bass and sociologist James Penner, to name just two in addition to Bishop Robert Schnase – have indicated the critical role played by intentional practices of devotion and study in transmitting Christian faith from one generation to another, and in changing our faith from something we do as an activity to a deep part of our very being, so the effort we put into this is likely to bear fruit for some time to come.

At the top of today's message, I mentioned that in its most basic form, our ability to bear fruit will relate to two things: maximizing or adding the factors that support and encourage growth; and minimizing or removing the factors that suppress growth. And the great thing in all of this, is that we have a room full of experts in the topic. You know from experience, from your own innate wisdom, from the things that God has opened to you in life, from the learnings of health sciences and psychology, what some of the things are that enhance life and diminish life. You know the role of a positive attitude, the importance of fitness and nutrition, the benefits that prayer can bring your body, mind and spirit. You also know the poisonous impact of grudges, jealousy, processed foods, a sedentary lifestyle, and negative self-talk that may well have been an unwelcome companion since childhood. I'm not the expert on these things, you are; and you are surrounded by people willing to support you. But I will underline one additional factor that we may or may not have considered.

Although the Christian Church has made, and continues to make errors that have made terrible impacts on everyone from indigenous communities, to young people struggling to understand and embrace their sexual selves, we do have the profound gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. When

we approach the heart of Christ, we enter into those wonderful fruits of the Spirit enumerated by Paul: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we perceive our lives as a walk with the risen Christ, anxieties that seem insurmountable are confronted by one who will not be subdued by such things. When we listen, truly listen to what he says in the gospels we will be astonished by his dogged determination to always choose life in the face of death. There are techniques we can follow in our personal lives or in our life as a congregation that will help us bear fruit, but none of it compares with entrusting our lives to the actual source of abundance: Christ Jesus, travelling evangelist, teacher of wisdom, God's eternal word in human form, life-gardener extraordinaire.

In this special time of year – of self-examination, of turning toward all that affirms life and away from all that denies the power of love, a fertile time of pause and joy and wonder – may the fruit of the Spirit be evidenced and enjoyed in your life and in our life together. In the name of Christ, who plants these seeds of faith and supports the gift of growth, Amen.

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