**Manure?!**

**Isaiah 5:1-7**

**Luke 13:6-9**

3/1/15

Thought for Meditation:

A good gardener will do what it takes to help a vine bear fruit. What fruit does God want? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Gal. 5:22-23). These are the fruits of the Spirit. And this is what God longs to see in us. And like a careful gardener, he will clip and cut away anything that interferes.

*Max Lucado, A Gentle Thunder p144*

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This may seem strange to say on a day like this, but I love lilacs! One of my favorite parts of spring is smelling lilacs in bloom. We moved into our house about eleven years ago last October. I had no idea what plants we had in our yard. In the spring I noticed that there was a lilac in our neighbor’s yard, right at the border of our yard. It was a fairly large shrub, so I couldn’t wait for it to bloom. Finally it bloomed, maybe three to four small branches with blooms. I was rather disappointed.

Our neighbors were not into yard work, so after the blooms were gone I pruned off the dead branches and fertilized the plant and waited for the next spring. The second year there might have been two to three branches with blooms. I asked our neighbors if I could prune the lilac back and thin out the old branches. Blooms only grow on new branches. I again fertilized the shrub. All summer the plant looked beautiful. The next spring there may have been three or four branches with blooms. I gave up.

A couple years later a new family moved into the house. Toni Jean loves yard work. She pruned and fertilized the lilac. Still only a few blooms. After several years she whacked it off right at the ground, hoping that all new growth would produce blooms. No luck. By the middle of that summer the lilac was gone. Toni Jean dug it up and planted grass.

I imagine that there are some gardeners here. Some of you probably have the same question I’ve always had – how do you know when to nurture an old plant hoping that it will grow? And how do you know when it is time to get rid of it and start over?

Today is the second Sunday of Lent and we are looking at our second parable. As Jesus traveled through Samaria toward Jerusalem he told a number of parables. He was trying to teach his disciples how to live faithfully in a culture that did not encourage following Jesus. Luke included these stories to encourage the first Christians as they tried to follow Jesus.

To understand our parable we need to look at the verses that are right before it. At the beginning of chapter thirteen some people came to Jesus and asked him about some people who had been murdered. Jesus said that there is no direct connection between suffering and sin. Those who suffer the most are not necessarily the ones who have sinned the most. In the midst of that he makes a challenging statement – “Unless you repent you will also perish!” He said that twice to show how urgent it is to repent. Then he tells our parable. It has something to do with repentance.

To understand our parable you also need to look at the parable from Isaiah that Ron read a few minutes ago. God planted a vineyard, which referred to the kingdom of Israel. They were planted in a prime location, given the best of soils and everything they would need to produce fruit. But when God looked for that fruit it wasn’t there. Therefore God was going to judge and punish the vineyard. God tore down the walls so that animals would trample over the vineyard. God ignored the briers and thorns as they grew up in the midst of the vineyard. God wouldn’t allow rain to fall on the vineyard so that the vines would be destroyed. All of that points to the exile, when the Israelites were taken to Babylon.

This Old Testament story is a parable of divine severity. God expects the fruits of justice and righteousness but all he got was selfishness, idolatry and sin. Therefore God destroyed his vineyard. Because the Israelites would not repent they were cut off from God’s salvation. Every Jew would have known this story of Israel as God’s vineyard.

When Jesus told the parable about the fig tree being planted in the vineyard, everyone listening would have known that Jesus was talking about Israel and its religious leaders. It wasn’t unusual to plant a fig tree in the middle of a vineyard. There wasn’t a lot of good land so if there was a place in a vineyard it would probably have good soil that should produce a good crop.

For three years the owner of the vineyard went to this tree looking for fruit, and didn’t find any figs. I love figs. I know they are a fruit, but to me that taste like candy. In my mind Fig Newtons are a delicacy. I have a sense that this farmer felt the same way. So, when he didn’t find any figs he was disappointed. He wanted to cut down the tree. At that point Jesus added an unexpected twist to the story.

The gardener, who would have been the farmer’s servant, told him to wait one more year. He would do everything he could to help that tree produce fruit, including fertilizing it with manure. The word Jesus used for manure is not common in the Bible. manure is not often used in religious illustrations. There is a modern word that would probably be a better translation, but I won’t use it in the pulpit. I’ll let you use your imagination!

If the fig tree pointed to the religious leaders, the idea that it needed manure was probably an insult. It was a rather bawdy and humorous image. I think we sometimes forget that Jesus often used earthy images, in this case literally.

The other thing about manure is that it works slowly. It isn’t a quick fix. It would take at least a year to see whether it worked. I doubt that most of us have ever thought of manure as a symbol of God’s patience, but that is what it is. God is not in a hurry. God is patient and merciful. Turning around a person’s life, much less turning a church around, is going to take time. However, God has all the time in the world. He created time.

The point of this parable is that no mercy is expected. We expect God’s severity, God’s judgment and punishment. Instead, we receive God’s patience and mercy. We are called to repent because God’s mercy is available to those who repent.

On Ash Wednesday I talked about repentance. We heard that the Old Testament word for repentance means to turn around. The New Testament word means to change your mind. In our parable we learn another idea. To repent is to produce fruit. True repentance makes a difference in one’s life and will be acted out in some way, in a life that produces fruit.

In the Holy Land there are two bodies of water. We call them seas but they are really lakes. The Sea of Galilee is in the northern part of Israel. Much of Jesus ministry surrounded that lake. It’s a freshwater lake, filled with fish. The area around it is filled with life. The other lake is the Dead Sea. Its name alone tells us something about it. It’s very salty and there is very little life in it or in the area around it. It’s a desolate area.

The difference between the two lakes is that the Sea of Galilee takes in water from the mountains and streams that surround it and the Jordan River flows out of it and goes south to the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee takes in and sends out. The Dead Sea only takes in. There are no rivers that flow out of it.

All of us need to take in. We need to receive God’s love and mercy. We need help from others to live. We can’t survive without taking in. We also need to give out, to produce fruit. If we don’t give out, if we don’t help others and participate in some sort of ministry our lives will be desolate and barren. We will dry up and die.

During Lent, as we move to Holy Week and Easter, I invite you to think about your life and your ministry. If you are feeling dead or like you’re withering, get involved in some type of ministry. Serve other people, teach Sunday school, lead a small group, share your faith with someone, go on a mission trip, visit someone in the hospital or a shut-in. We are called to repent by producing fruit, by giving away the love we have received.

The second lesson that this parable offers us is that we are called to trust in God, who is patient and merciful. A Yankee northerner went on a business trip down South, in rural Georgia. He stopped at diner for breakfast, ordered scrambled eggs and sausage. When the waitress put his plate in front of him there was a white blob on his plate. He had no idea what it was. He asked the waitress, “What’s this?” She said “Them’s grits.” “But I didn’t order any grits,” he replied. “You don’t order grits.” she explained. “They just come.”

That is what God’s grace and mercy are all about. You don’t order God’s love. You don’t deserve it. It’s free. It just comes. All we have to do is trust it, accept it and celebrate it. I love preaching about grace and mercy. If you hear nothing else during my time here as interim pastor other than God’s grace, I will be satisfied. I have a sense that we understand the concept of grace, but deep down we struggle to believe it’s true. At least I know I do.

If you are not comfortable thinking of manure as a symbol of grace, which is understandable, let me offer you another way that this passage points to God’s grace. When the farmer wants to get rid of the tree he orders, “Chop it down!” It’s not radically different than when the crowds cried out during Holy Week “Crucify him!” Both were attempts to get rid of the offending party – a tree and Jesus. When the gardener asks the farmer for patience, to let him have another year to work with the tree he says “let it alone.” When Jesus was on the cross his first words were “Father, forgive them.” The Greek word for “let it alone” is *aphes*, which is the same word that Jesus prayed on the cross, “Forgive them.” The gardener makes the same request as Jesus. “Forgive this tree, forgive these people, not because it deserves it, not because they deserve it, but because you are a God of grace and mercy and patience.”

As with our parable last week, this one open-ended. It doesn’t end. Does the farmer let the tree live for another year? Does the tree produce a crop the next year? Will you and I respond to the call to produce fruit, and the call to trust in God’s patience and mercy?