

“More Manure”

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – March 20, 2022

Please Read:

Isaiah 55:1-9
Luke 13:1-9

The title for this sermon, “More Manure,” comes directly from the parable in our Gospel lesson. The Greek word for manure, “*koprion*,” is a crude, impolite word for church conversation, occurring only one place in the New Testament; here. I would not, of course have used it in front of a dignified group like you, had not Jesus used it first.

But Jesus told a parable: The owner of the vineyard had a fig tree. He came looking for fruit. For three years he’d been looking for fruit. Fig trees bear fruit every year, but for three years there has been no fruit. The tree is hopelessly infertile.

“Cut it down!” says the owner. But “Master,” pleaded the gardner, “Let it be. I’ll dig around it, throw some more manure on it. Let it go... Manure ought to help.”

It’s a parable told in response to the news of the day about which Jesus’ followers were wondering. The first headline, Pilate had Galilean pilgrims killed in the Temple and then mixed their blood with ritual sacrifice. It was a cruel defilement of both the innocents who were killed and the Temple itself. The second headline was possibly related to Pilate’s construction of a new aqueduct. He had stolen money from the Jerusalem treasury to guild it and probably used slave labor, so the zealots were rioting, and some historians have suggested that the collapse was sabotage either by Pilate or the Jews. And so, as we are all prone to do, the disciples wanted to know who was to blame.

It’s important to note that Jesus wanted *his hearers* to repent, to change their minds. He makes it clear that he didn’t believe that anyone’s sin caused the tragedies. People die, and especially people held captive by the violent tyrants of this world. That’s an old story: might makes right. Jesus offers the way of non-violence, the way of peaceful resistance.

So, when Jesus calls for repentance here, it is to turn away from collaborating with Roman violence and injustice, and of blaming the victims for their own suffering, to think that murderous violence is the only kind of power there is. We are to turn away from blame and revenge.

Lent is a time in the church’s life cycle when we intentionally try and be more honest, more direct with God and with one another about our lives. As Jesus tells the parable, throwing more manure is the last-ditch effort to get something to grow, to produce something worthwhile at harvest, to stimulate positive results. In the parable anyway, the fact is that the tree ought to be cut down. The master is perfectly justified in his negative judgments about the tree. Yet due to the pleading of the gardener, there is still time for the fig tree. There’s still time. Spread a little manure on it and give it a little more time.

You might be surprised to know that trees have rights in Judaism? That’s right. It’s called *orlah* and forbids eating the fruit of newly planted trees during their first three years of life. *Orlah* is from Leviticus 19:23-25:

When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall regard their fruit as forbidden; for three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. In the fourth year all their fruit shall be set apart for rejoicing in the Lord. But in the fifth year you may eat of their fruit, that their yield may be increased for you: I am the Lord your God.

I find that interesting, because this is not a parable about “turn or burn” but rather about remembering the patient goodness and mercy of God. The parable is for any of us who are willing to admit that we’re not living a life that is worthy of the name Christian, follower of Jesus Christ. I’ll be the first to step forward at this point. I am angry about the war in Ukraine, and I could easily be manipulated into hatred for Mr. Putin and go along with violence to stop him. Yesterday during the March madness game when North Carolina took down number one ranked Baylor, I just about threw something at the TV watching UNC nearly snatch defeat from the jaws of victory... The violence in my heart is easily stirred up.

It’s time now, as good as any, in Lent, to turn back to God in humility and admit that I need more time to respond to Jesus’ call. It’s a time to learn humility again. Humility, by the way, is another earthy word, which comes from the Latin root “humus”, which is literally soil formed from decayed leaves and other vegetable matter. Humility, like such soil, is the context in which the stuff of life can be transformed into fertile and rich areas of growth.

Manure is just an intensified version on the same theme! Spring is the time of year when the farmers spread manure on the fields. It helps stuff grow. My relatives in Lancaster County have dairies and huge tanker trucks for transporting and spreading manure on fields. You can smell this stuff for miles. They call it the smell of money.

Sometimes we need to recognize that even when we land right in it, or feel as though we’re covered in the humus, the manure of life, that’s precisely when we can face up to the truth of who we really are. There’s really a lavish mercy here. God’s grace. Not the dignified, “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer” churchy kind of grace. It’s the “spread a little manure on it” cow-stable-variety kind of grace.

Earlier Jesus was urging the people to repent or face dire consequences. And in this Lent we encourage one another to repent, to change our thinking. But let’s be clear, we repent in order that we might grow in conviction and commitment to God’s grace and self-giving love; we repent so that we might turn back to God and receive the rich new life and growth of Easter Spring.

There is a sense of urgency in our texts today because we all think that we’ll have more time. While in Paris, I met over coffee with a friend who’s a retired French executive now doing consulting work. He was in Kiyiv three weeks ago on business and relayed the attitude of his clients there. “There’s no way the Russians would invade Ukraine! Why would they do that?” they said. He shared that with the comment, “How quickly things can change!” I must admit that I am constantly amazed at the capacity we all seem to have for delusion and denial. We pretend we are immune, or that we know what we need and can fend for ourselves. But there will come a time when the bright light of truth will break forth over the darkness of our minds.

In light of the fig tree parable, consider what fruit you need to bear in your life? What needs to change so that you are living the flourishing and productive life you are meant to live? What about our church, and the many churches of this country...? What type of fruit are we expected to bear? What kind of harvest does God look for in us? And what happens to a church that's not producing fruit? Rather than cut it down, Jesus here is telling us to spread a little manure!

There is still time, and maybe with the right amount of mercy... we shall bear fruit. Because of the gardener's pleading, there is still time for the fig tree to blossom and be fruitful.

Today we welcome a few new members. I am thankful to God for each of them, for they are all blossoming: All are eager to join in the labor; some of them have faith stories worthy of a Netflix documentary, one is studying to be a human rights lawyer, and one is even coming from an hour away, some are tremendously gifted in the arts. These new members inspire me in a time when many of us have become tired, taken our faith for granted, or may be confused with God's calling.

We aren't told how the story ends with the tree. Jesus leaves it open-ended. Did a miracle occur? Did the manure fix it? In the parable of the seed, only a few seeds produced a miraculous harvest. When Jesus told them to cast their unfruitful nets to the other side of the boat, to give their fishing more time, they could hardly pull them all in, they caught so many fish. But in this story, we don't know. All we know is that, for the time being, the tree is still there. There is still time.

Barrenness has been overturned before in Biblical history. Sarah was barren, without a child well into her old age. She laughed all the way from the geriatric ward to the delivery room. Rachel was barren, and she bore twins. Perhaps even for us there will come a time when we really give birth. Perhaps one day I'll preach so well that we'll have to tell people to take a number before they can join as members. Perhaps one day our church will be famous for the love and care we offer newcomers; we will be famous for the service we render to the poor and hungry in Fairfield County; we will have too many volunteers to teach Sunday School, to pray, to care for the sick and visit the lonely and prisoners, and march for peace...

For now, there is still time. The master is willing to wait one more year. But only with more manure! We would do well to stop and let the Spirit search our hearts and minds and guide us anew, for some time, we must bear fruit worthy of repentance...

One last interesting linguistic note: the word *αφεες* is translated in this parable as "let it alone." "Master, let it alone, I'll put manure on it, dig it. Let it alone." That word is the same New Testament root for forgiveness.

Jesus came preaching, "The hour is come. Repent! Change your ways! Believe!" And we crucified him. He came looking for fruit. Instead, he found barrenness, hard-hearted, dried up, sterile sin. He came looking for fruit, saying, "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world." But we judged him, we nailed him to a cross, then went back to business as usual, back to the clanking machinery of nothingness. Heaven heaved and raged, earth shook, ready to burst forth at last in a flood of well-deserved judgment. And from the cross Jesus said, "Father, *αφεες*, let it alone...forgive them, for they know not what they do..."

His blood dripped down, fertilizer for us, digging deep into our roots, so we might bear fruit... so we might have more time to bear fruit.

Brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ: what fruit are you supposed to be producing in your life that you're not right now? How will you allow God to stimulate growth in you, in us? Obviously, more manure is a rather earthy euphemism for investment, for care, for sacrifice, for study and prayer, for forgiveness, reconciliation, simplifying life, for community, for solitude, for loving and giving and a whole host of other forms of refreshment and faithfulness.

There is time left for us all. Not much perhaps, but some. Maybe a year? However, much time you have, will you bear the fruit God desires?

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.