

Bearing Fruit

Luke 13:1-9

Home Moravian Church, March 23, 2025

No one likes to be scolded for wasting resources. We know it's responsible to limit our use. Here at Home Church we love how our wise facilities manager, Dustin Hackler, takes initiative to reduce Home Church's footprint; lately he's been replacing all our lights with LEDs. Our Wednesday night cooks are careful with the purchase and use of food—which contrasts with one summer when the quality of the food slipped at our summer camp, Laurel Ridge, and one disgruntled camper complained that the corn dog he'd just eaten was “a waste of a good stick.”

But there are worse things. I googled the phrase “waste of resources,” and I saw a post where a depressed young person wrote, “*I am a waste of resources.*”

I am a waste of resources. Did they decide that on their own, or did someone tell them that? Did the fig tree hear the landowner say that, in today's gospel text? “Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”

I don't know if trees can hear that, but I know people can. I once preached on this text to female inmates at the local jail, and they could all identify with that tree. They had heard people say things like that about them.

“Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”

There is such grief in that image. There is grief all through today's text, with its stories of untimely death. People run to tell Jesus about the slaughter of faithful Jews by order of Pontius Pilate. Jesus responds with a reference to eighteen deaths in the collapse of a tower. In Jesus' day, these stories were big enough news that Luke assumed the details would be remembered

forever. Today, no historian has been able to trace the events. The stories are lost; but the conversation continues.

When terrible things happen, when lives are cut down like so many trees, people want to talk. We want to talk until we find a reason. We want to talk until tragedy makes sense. That's why this conversation will probably never end.

The conversation was going on long before Jesus' day. The Israelites tried to make sense of their history of suffering. I'm grossly oversimplifying here, but to some degree what emerged from their conversation was a calculation: If bad things happen to us, it's because Yahweh is displeased with us. Therefore, let us obey God, and then nothing bad will happen. Conversely, on the worst sinners falls the worst suffering—or the biggest tower.

Jesus is having none of it. Jesus hears the assumptions that fuel the conversation, and he challenges those assumptions. Of the slaughtered Galileans he says: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" And he answers his own question, emphatically: "No, I tell you." He amplifies his point with a second case: "Or those eighteen 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." God did not gather the eighteen worst people in Jerusalem and place them in the path of that tower just before it fell. No, I tell you.

Luke thought the stories would be forever remembered; yet eventually they became just more losses, the kind that happen all the time. Pilate killed some Jews—well, Pilate killed a lot of people. A tower fell in Siloam—well, things fall down all the time. The stories were lost as more things broke, more buildings fell, more people died. It happens. As Job said: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away."

Twice in this text, Jesus acknowledges the reality of sudden and tragic death. Twice he insists that the people who died were not singled out for punishment. Yet twice he also has a warning for the living: “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Given what Jesus has just established—that sudden, tragic death is not a punishment for sin—he cannot mean that our physical survival depends on our being sinless. That would reverse the very teaching he just offered. So what does it mean that “unless you repent, you will all perish as they did”?

The only thing the deaths have in common is suddenness. Maybe the only thing the dead had in common was unreadiness.

Is anyone really ready to die? People sometimes tell me that they are. As the pastor of this extraordinary congregation, I have had the privilege of talking to members who have lived well past 90 and even past 100. In January we lost Lucy Willingham at the age of 108. Her sister, Eleanor Vance, has reached the end of her life at age 96. I have had the great privilege of hearing both their stories, and many others. What I hear, consistently, is that our oldest members feel they have done everything they wanted to do. They are grateful. They feel blessed. And the people who love them know they have blessed others. When your life has been a blessing to others, then yours has been a fruitful life.

When Jesus pairs stories about sudden death with a warning about repentance, maybe the next thing we expect to hear is damnation. But Jesus, as always, confounds our expectations. Today’s text ends, not in hell, but in a vineyard, beside a little tree.

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the man working the vineyard, ‘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?””

When we read parables, we tend to assume that the most powerful character is a stand-in for God. That assumption says a lot about how we imagine God. That assumption, for example, makes God the unjust judge who grudgingly gives us what we ask for because we won't shut up about it. That assumption makes God the boss who praises an employee for dealing dishonestly. That assumption makes God a businessman, assessing which tree is a waste of his very expensive soil. *Cut it down.*

But the man working in the vineyard 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.”

The parable is not a story of damnation. It's a story of mercy, standing against judgment. Both judgment and death will come in time. But both are wrapped in mercy and in hope. Sometimes, the tree is not cut down. And in that case, it has more time to bear fruit.

What if the concern of today's text is not why we die, but how we live? Planted in this earthly soil, are we bearing fruit? If not: What's holding us back? Jesus urges repentance, and then he tells a story about fruitfulness. Could the one lead to the other?

I've heard repentance defined as a turning around. We could think of it as turning around our focus, from ourselves to God. Focusing our attention on God releases us from our endless and impossible calculations for how we'll escape suffering and tragedy. Focusing on God releases us for fruitfulness.

When tragedy strikes—and it will strike—will we spend our energy assigning blame, calculating what we or someone else did wrong? Or will we spend our energy focusing on God,

trusting God, not tying our trust to life's joys and sorrows but simply existing in the presence of a power much greater than ourselves? As Job actually said, if you read the whole verse: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; *blessed be the name of the Lord.*"

We don't understand the gift of life. We don't understand the loss of life. But blessed be the name of the Lord. Perhaps the ax will not fall this year. What will we do with the time we are given?

Some of you may have already heard the story I'm about to tell. It's one of my favorites. Like many of my favorites, it begins with the words, "I read this great article in the *New Yorker*...."

Back in 2011, the *New Yorker* published an article about how we get all those tasty new breeds of apples that keep turning up in the grocery stores. Fascinating stuff. Did you know that the University of Minnesota has an apple breeding program? In this article, a reporter describes a day there with an apple breeder named David Bedford, who walked the rows in the orchard with a can of orange spray paint, looking for the next great apple. At each tree, Bedford stopped and sampled the fruit. If the apple failed to impress, the tree received a spray of orange paint—the mark of the executioner. "That day," says the reporter, "I watched him terminate dozens of unique hybrids whose like the world will never see again, and by the end of the day I had a newfound respect for the breeder as the godlike master of his domain, the ultimate arbiter of life and death in the orchard."¹

Godlike There's that assumption again.

But Bedford told the reporter that the job was a little nerve-wracking. He was aware that each spray of orange could wipe out something that might have been truly wonderful, given time

¹ John Seabrook, "Crunch," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 21, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/11/21/crunch>.

and the right conditions. He told how, in 1982, he had second thoughts about a tree numbered MN1711. For years it had failed to produce much of anything, and Bedford's predecessor had recommended its removal. But as Bedford studied the data on the tree, he noticed that it was poorly located in a low, wet spot. So he decided to give the tree some extra love, and one more year. Today, the fruit from that struggling little tree has a name you know: Honeycrisp.

“Sir,” said the gardener, “let it alone for one more year. Let me care for it. Let me love it. Let me supply it with all that it needs, and release it to fruitfulness.”

You know: In the gospel of John, Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener.

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; and sometimes, the ax is stayed for another year. Let us live that year trusting God, and through our trust, may we be released from fear and calculation, set free for fruitfulness. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen.