

Luke 13:1-9

The Gift of Abundant Life

Ken and I happen to live next door to a woman who understands gardening. She spends a lot of time guiding us as Ken and I are not nearly so knowledgeable about these things and we often seek her advice. Other times she just sees us out in the yard and pops over to see how our gardening endeavours are going. A few years back we purchased a new shrub and chose a spot for it near the front corner of our home. As we were preparing to place it in the ground our neighbour came round the corner and suggested that we really loosen the roots, poking and prodding them in preparation for planting. We also had purchased fertilizer to place in the hole before putting the shrub in and then getting the dirt back around the roots giving it nourishment and stability. Then a lot of water.

Neither Ken or I had thought about loosening the roots system in preparation for planting. It seems a rather ruthless thing to do when the plant was already being traumatized by being transplanted, and yet it was exactly what was needed. We now do that even for the delicate seedlings we purchase each spring for our bedding plants. Turns out that tussling helps produce a stronger root system.

It makes me think of that gardener in the scripture reading who asked the owner of the vineyard to allow him one more year to tend to the fig tree to see if he could make it produce fruit. A year of grace for the tree.

But let's take a moment to look at what got us to this story of the barren fig tree. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem knowing that this was a journey that was not going to end well. As he was making his way, there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Though the Bible does not give us more history about this attack, it is known from other sources that Pilate was ruthless and that terrible things happened.

Jesus adds to this the report of eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Both of these were stories of harm and evil, of people befalling a terrible fate. One story about people suffering at the hands of a willfully cruel person the other of people in an accident.

No question was asked of Jesus regarding these two incidents, but Jesus gets to the point of their statement really quickly. You see, there was a sense in those ancient times that people got what they deserved. Actually, there are a lot of people who still think that today. If something terrible happened to you or your family it must be because someone had done something really bad, sinned in such a way that God was punishing

them. And Jesus says emphatically, that none of those who suffered these events were worse sinners than anyone else.

Still, it kind of feels like Jesus is making some kind of correlation that can be misconstrued. In order that we understand that Jesus is not contradicting himself, it is important to know that evil just is evil. Accidents just happen. Yet there are consequences for sin. The consequence is that someone suffers. Not because suffering is God's punishment, but rather because neglect, harm, power mongering, and a whole host of ways people manage their lives or the decisions they make have consequences and those consequences effect people's lives, our own and that of others. Sometimes those consequences are deadly.

So why does Jesus say, "I tell you; unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." In fact, he says it twice so it is probably something we should pay attention to. So, what is Jesus saying if on one hand he says that it was not sin and punishment that caused these terrible events, well at least not on the part of those who suffered and died, and on the other hand he is saying repent or you will perish as they did?

Could it be that Jesus is just saying, take a look at your life. What are you doing that you need to pay attention to? What actions in your own life are causing harm? The word repentance or to repent seems a rather archaic way of saying something so let's take a look at that idea. In part, to repent means to see the world in a different or new light. As much as we don't often speak of it, repentance "is core to the preaching of Jesus, Peter, and Paul."¹

The Bible, both the Old and New Testaments urge repentance but also promises forgiveness. Now if you feel you have nothing to repent of then what you are hearing will have little meaning for you, but many of us can find things in our lives that need correction. Sometimes the same things get us over and over again and we seem to be continually needing to ask forgiveness.

Sins of gossip, of adultery, addiction whether to food, booze, substances, or computer games... insert the name of your addiction. It may be an unhealthy desire for power and control. It may be that you have to look at your intentions. Are they for good or for harm? Just this last week I was in a conversation about revenge and how often we want that. It may be that repentance, as one book stated, is "running away from bad habits, tactical withdrawal from being a morally deficient moron, and the unhardening of one's heart."²

Repentance though is not the end of it. Like all you have to do is be remorseful for having made a poor decision or consistently making poor decisions. Repentance is meant to lead one into a different way of being in the world and in relationship with God.

¹ Jacobson, Rolf A., Editor. *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Augsburg Books. Minneapolis. 2008. P144.

² Ibid. Page 145.

It means renewed efforts, often daily, to get it right, to make the best decisions, to really pay attention to how one is living. Paying attention to your thinking and your heart all while remembering that you and others are trying to walk in God's way and in God's will.

The five short verses about repentance and the one parable about the barren fig tree that follows might not appear to have much in common, and the parable might even feel rather unsatisfying as we never hear how the gardener and the tree made out in the end. Did the gardener succeed in getting the tree to produce fruit? And what significance does this for us anyway?

What if we considered ourselves to be the fig tree? The season of Lent is known as a time of reflection. Can we think of ourselves in light of the fig tree? Are you bearing fruit? If not, why not? What, in your way of following Jesus...what does not bear fruit?

God gives us everything we need to flourish. It is God's desire that we live abundant lives. Lives that are abundant in hope, love, joy, peace, and grace. Now that fig tree was given a year to produce fruit. It is not that you have only a year to get your act together, but what would you or could you do in a year to bear fruit or bear fruit in abundance.

Often we think we have to do this work alone, but even the fig tree had a gardener who was going to dig around it and put manure on it in order to make the conditions conducive to allow the tree the best possibility for becoming fruit bearing.

Are there people in your life who can tend to you, dig around you, tussle the roots, fertilize, and help you become more and more a fruit bearer of God that you are meant to be? My hope would be that this congregation, those of us together here can help one another bear fruit in our families, with our friends, and in community.

One might also ask, what kind of fruit are we to bear? There are many answers to this that could get really specific based on your resources, your character and particular gifts, but generally the fruit is of the Spirit...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23). These are fruit that each Christian is called to bear.

So trust that you are meant to flourish, to bear fruit, and that may take a little or a lot of work as you and others tend to your roots, fertilize your imagination and creativity, your heart and your mind. You may find that there is some trimming or pruning that needs to happen, you may even find yourself transplanted, but through it all, the intent is that you will grow and bear fruit that God will use to bring life to you and to others. Conditions can be made right and given time and patience you may find yourself abundantly sharing who you are with others in faithfulness to God's will for your life.

Thanks be to God for the wonderful gift of abundant life.