

Sermon: Lent 3, Year C

Luke 13:1-9

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“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.”

Last summer, my husband and I started giving our daughters a weekly allowance. We made this decision because they had become constant beggars; no matter where we were, they always found something to beg for. We simply got tired of always telling them that they could not have this newest thing, and we decided that an allowance would take us out of that role. The good news is that, indeed, we took the decision-making out of our hands and put it into their hands. The bad news is that we took the decision-making out of our hands and put it into their hands. For at ages six and four, which is how old they were last summer, they lacked what I'm going to call long-term strategic financial planning skills. In other words, when they something, they wanted it, and gave no thought to the future.

This all came to a head the weekend that we took them to the Niles Bluegrass Festival. To my great dismay, they weren't at all interested in the bluegrass. Leta—my youngest—was very interested in the playground, and Alex—my oldest—was interested in the booths and all the wares for sale there. Alex asked me if I would take her over to the booths to buy something, and since she had brought her allowance money, I walked her over. The first thing she saw was a giant, silly, floppy hat and she wanted it. I told her that we should walk around and look at what else was there, to make sure that this was what she really wanted. She protested, “But Mom! I already know that I really want this!” So I decided that I needed to try something different. I took her over to a park bench, sat her down, and explained to her that when it comes to money, when you say “yes” to one thing, you say “no” to another. “So,” I told her, “if you say ‘yes’ to this silly floppy hat, you say ‘no’ to the princess dress-up things I see at the next booth.” “But I want those princess dress-up things!” she said. “I know you do,” I said. “But if you say ‘yes’ to that, you're also saying ‘no’ to the beaded necklaces I saw as we walked over here.” Finally she began to understand. She agreed to walk around, and in the end decided to buy a fairy sticker book. She left the Festival feeling happy.

Until the next day. The next day, after church, I took Alex to the mall to buy her a new summer outfit. On the way to the store, we passed by Build-A-Bear Workshop. Alex asked to go in to buy a new outfit for her build-a-bear. I crouched down by her and said, “But honey, you spent all your money on the fairy sticker book yesterday, remember?” She burst into tears and wailed, “But I didn't know that we would be here today!” “I know you didn't, honey,” I said. “But when you said ‘yes’ to the fairy sticker book yesterday, you also said ‘no’ to everything else you might see for a little while. I know this is hard, but it's the way the world works.”

I have found, as I often do, that what I told my daughter that weekend was also good advice for me. The financial aspect of it is certainly true: If I say “yes” to eating out too often, for example, I may find myself saying “no” to paying my bills without borrowing the money to do so. But it is easy to see the application of this—(If we say “yes” to one thing, we say “no” to another, and the inverse)—in nearly every aspect of our lives. If I say “yes” to playing a

computer game, I'm saying "no" to reading a book. If I say "yes" to watching TV, I'm saying "no" to exercise. With every "yes," there is an infinite number of "no's," both those we can easily see—as Alex could see the other unbought items at the Bluegrass Festival—and those we do not think about or cannot foresee—as Alex did not see the lost opportunity at Build-a-Bear until it was too late. The question then becomes this: What do we say "yes" to that causes us to say "no" to God; or to a richer intimacy with God; or to a fuller, more abundant life in Christ?

In today's Gospel, Jesus was faced with two tragic events. In the first, Pilate had killed some Galileans in their own temple; in the second, 18 people had died when a tower fell on them. Those in the first group were victims of human malice; those in the second were victims of chance. Jesus' response to these two events is not what one would expect. The people would have expected a sympathetic response: either an "Isn't it awful! Let us all pray together" or a message of political anger and retaliation. The fact that Jesus does not respond in either of these ways calls into sharp relief the importance of what he says next; if he is going to abandon social niceties or cultural expectations, his response must be pretty important. His response is this: Repent, or we will perish as well.

But the consequences of failing to repent are worse than death by human malice or chance. To explain this, Jesus tells us the parable of the fig tree. Here the owner of a vineyard has planted a fig tree. We should note here that the fig tree was planted on fertile ground, with a gardener to care for and nurture it. Yet despite these advantages—these gifts of grace—after three years the fig tree has still not borne fruit. The owner orders the gardener to cut it down, but the gardener begs for one more year, during which he will tend to it with extra care. If at the end of that year, the tree still has not borne fruit, then the owner may cut it down.

Now I would like to interpret this parable for you, but need to say that there is some scholarly debate about the interpretation. So I'm going to tell you what most people agree upon, the terms of the debate, and where I stand on this. In this parable, we have three major players. First, we have the fig tree, which represents the Israelites who were listening to this parable. They would have understood themselves to be the fig tree—this was a common trope, and one they were used to. The message of repentance would not have been strange to them either—not in general and certainly not in Luke's gospel. Second, we have the owner of the vineyard: God the Father. God sent to the fig tree a gardener—Jesus—to coax some godly fruit from it. Everyone agrees on this. The debate centers around the time frame in the parable. It's worth noting that the owner gave the fig tree three years to bear fruit, which corresponds to the number of years of Jesus' active ministry. What, then, happens after the one year of grace given through the intervention of the gardener? What happened one year after the crucifixion of Jesus? Some say that in that time the apostles built a fledgling Christian church, and having borne fruit saved themselves from the proverbial axe. Some say that a year after the crucifixion the first martyrdoms began with St. Stephen. According to this interpretation, the axe fell and continues to fall. But other scholars choose a less literal interpretation. The number of years between the intervention of the gardener and the time of Judgment does not matter, they say; what matters is that we repent before it is too late. This is the interpretation that I favor. In other words, we need to say "yes" to God now, while we still have the chance.

The question that I keep asking, is why isn't this fig tree bearing fruit? In other words, what has the fig tree said "yes" to that causes it to say "no" to bearing fruit? Now another possible interpretation of this parable is that the fig tree actually represents a sub-section of the Israelites: the Pharisees. If this is the case, it could be saying "yes" to outward signs of righteousness and piety—to looking the part of a good fig tree. I have to say, there are times I

feel bad for the Pharisees, for this is not a hard trap to fall into, especially in a liturgical tradition, with so many outward signs and symbols meant to represent an inward reality. As you all know, our Lenten study groups have been reading Richard Foster's book *Celebrating the Disciplines*. In his chapter on fasting, Foster asks why a religious practice that has so much Scriptural precedent—including that it was practiced and endorsed by Jesus—has so fallen out of favor in Christianity. He speculates that its bad reputation is a reaction to the extreme ascetic practices during the Middle Ages, when fasting was strictly regulated and often accompanied by other practices of self-mortification. He says of this period of time: "With the decline of the inward reality of the Christian faith, an increasing tendency to stress the only thing left, the outward form, developed. And whenever there is a form devoid of spiritual power, law will take over." Now I know a few historians and philosophers who would object to the idea that Christian faith lost its sense of "inward power" during the Middle Ages, but Foster's idea holds true. Like the Pharisees, we are called through this parable to reject a piety and religiosity that does not bear fruit in our day-to-day lives. Saying "yes" to false piety and burdensome rules and laws may make us look like pretty fig trees, but cause us to say "no" to an abundant life in Christ.

Of course, this is not the only thing that we say "yes" to that means we say "no" to Christ. Foster, for example, also talks about our sense of busyness, our constant rushing, the noise and bustle of our day-to-day lives. If we, for just a bit, say "no" to those things and "yes" to things like prayer and meditation, we will in fact be saying "yes" to Christ. We could go on and on: pride, materialism—pick your vice. All of these keep us from bearing the godly fruit we were meant to bear.

The second question that I keep asking about this little fig tree is this: What are the consequences of not bearing fruit?" The first, and most obvious, is personal. The owner of the vineyard planted the fig tree expecting to get figs. He had the right to expect figs. If he doesn't get some figs soon, he will chop the tree down. This is perfectly within his rights. When we, consciously or unconsciously, say "no" to God, when we fail to repent, we are in fact failing to live into the lives that God has every right to expect us to live. We have been given a period of grace, but sooner or later our time will be up, and our chance to bear fruit will pass.

The second consequence is communal, and this communal consequence is twofold. First, there's a little less fruit in the world. Fruit is a favorite in the Fulton household, because it's sweet—and we like sweet things—without being full of sugar or corn syrup. When my children eat fruit, I know that I'm helping them to grow and stay healthy while still giving them a bit of sweetness in their day. When that fig tree fails to bear fruit, it doesn't just harm itself. There is now a little less fruit for others. What do the people of God need to grow and stay healthy?

The second communal consequence: The owner tells the gardener to chop the tree down, for "Why," he asks, "should it exhaust the soil?" Fig trees require a lot of nourishment from the soil. The produce rich, sweet fruit, but it comes with a price. When our fig tree does not bear fruit, the price is still paid, but without any of the payoff. What does this look like in real life? One day, my daughter Leta threw a temper tantrum that basically lasted four hours. The worst part, I told her therapist, was that I had done everything that I'm supposed to do for about the first two hours, and then I lost it, and did nothing but yell for the next two hours. How am I supposed to teach her self-control, I asked, if I don't have any myself? At this the doctor smiled, and said, "Yes, your house has a case of leaky feelings." She went on to explain that feelings and attitudes are amazingly "leaky": they leak out of one person and into another really easily. It's hard to be in a room with a child who is tantruming without throwing a tantrum yourself. It is hard to sit at a table with an angry person, or a sad person, or a disgruntled person, without

becoming angry or sad or disgruntled yourself. The good news is that positive emotions are also leaky. A study published in December of 2008 by the British Medical Journal says that knowing someone who is happy makes you 15.3% more likely to be happy yourself. And it doesn't stop there. A happy friend of a friend increases your odds of happiness by 9.8%, and even your neighbor's sister's friend increases your happiness odds by 5.6%. Habits are leaky too. It's easier to lose weight, studies show, if your friends and family are not overweight. It's easier to stop smoking if you hang out with non-smokers. I would speculate that this is also true of spiritual healthiness. When we hang out with people who enjoy a good relationship with God and for whom that relationship is evident in the lives they lead (as it must be if the relationship is truly good), we increase our chances and our desire to build just such a relationship with our Lord. In other words, our bad habits and bad attitudes, our vices and our refusal to grow closer to God exhaust the soil: they make it harder for others to bear fruit. We are, as the apostle Paul went on to say, "One body, one spirit in Christ." When we repent, we do not simply save ourselves. We make it a little bit easier for others to save themselves as well.

The good news in all of this, of course, is that we are not alone. Hopefully we are surrounding ourselves with others who bear fruit. But more important than that, even, is the fact that we have a gardener who intercedes and cares for us. After caring for the fig tree for three years, the gardener begs for more time, and offers to give the tree extra care. This is what Jesus does for us. We can hear in the gardener's words, "Sir, let it alone for one more year," an echo of the words that Jesus would later utter on the cross: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Now I should add that when Jesus calls us yet again to bear fruit, when he bestows his grace upon us, it doesn't always look neat or pretty. The gardener, notice, is going to stir up the soil and heap manure on it. If the fig tree has said "yes" to pride, this should cure it! My family lives right on the north side of the bypass. When the weather is nice and I have the windows open and the wind is blowing from the south over farmland, across the bypass, and into our home, inevitably two little girls are going to come up to me and say, "Mom, what is that stinky smell?" And I get to explain that it is the smell of farmers trying to coax their crops into growing. This is a difficult concept for them, and can be for us as well: From all of that stinky messiness comes more abundant life. When Jesus calls us to repent, to bear fruit, it can look a lot like the messing up of our nice, comfortable lives. In order to say "yes" to Jesus, we may need to say "no" to those things that make our lives look pretty or feel comfortable right now.

When we say "yes" to one thing, we say "no" to another. Our gospel today calls us to repentance. This requires each of us, during this season of reflection and discipline, to discover those things in our lives that keep us from bearing the fruit we are meant to bear. When we say "no" to those things, we say "yes" to God's transforming grace, or as Richard Foster says, "We place ourselves before God so that he can transform us." During this Lenten season, may each of us give ourselves over to Jesus, our loving gardener, and allow him to mess up our lives a little so that we do not simply exhaust the soil, but come to bear a rich, sweet, nourishing fruit. Amen.