

“God’s Love Never Gives Up”
Luke 13:1-9
Sunday, February 28, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

This notice appeared in the window of a coat store in Nottingham, England: “We have been established for over 100 years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of coal nationalization, coat rationing, government control and bad payers. We have been cussed and discussed, messed about, lied to, held up, robbed and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next.”

A similar thing could be said about the Church, or about the kingdom of God, or about the Christian experiment. Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree to help us understand. The only requirement God places on us is to repent. It might seem that we are also required to bear fruit but, if we look closer, we see that it is the gardener, through his digging and manure-spreading, that truly brings forth the fruit.

Back in the day, it says in Genesis 2:15, “...God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”

But we messed things up, didn’t we? We did not care for the garden as we ought. Sin entered in. And so Jesus became the second Adam, who would redeem the failings of the first Adam.

In the story of the fig tree, God is the owner of the tree. God in Christ Jesus is also the gardener, digging and fertilizing; caring for the tree so it will be healthy and fruitful.

I. Digging around in the soil.

The parables of Jesus are about God and the kingdom of God. They do not tell us what we ought to do; they tell us what God is doing. God is digging up the hardened soil of our lives.

What we are called to do is to repent and to believe in God's reality. Jesus gives us a wake-up call; he tells it like it is in God's kingdom.

So, in this parable about the fig tree, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a fig tree. And God is like the owner of the fig tree. God, in the person of Jesus, is also the gardener.

God breaks up the soil to let more air and water in. Just when we get used to the status quo in our lives, God shakes us up. When God digs up the dried, hardened soil of our souls, it can loosen up some amazing possibilities. And if we allow God to dig deep, He can unearth wonderful treasures of strength and courage and giftedness that we didn't know we had.

This is true for us as individuals. It is also true for us as a church.

Somerset Maugham writes in his autobiography, Summing Up: "I knew that I had no lyrical quality, a small vocabulary, little gift of metaphor. The original and striking simile never occurred to me. Poetic flights...were beyond my powers. On the other hand, I had an acute power of observation, and it seemed to me that I could see a great many things that other people missed. I could put down in clear terms what I saw...I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought, with pains, that I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed."

God does not expect a fig tree to produce anything other than figs. But he does expect to see some figs over time. In the same way, God does not require that you or I exhibit gifts that we do not naturally possess. But God does expect us to cooperate and participate in this process of digging up the soil and allowing our best efforts to be realized in the form of fruits. Figs from

a fig tree. Music from a musician. New converts from an evangelist. Delicious food from a cook. A healthy garden from a green thumb.

And from all of us who follow Christ, God expects to see the fruits of our joyful Christian living. He expects to see fruits from the sharing of our faith with others. He expects to see fruits from the help we provide to those less fortunate. He expects to see the fruits of our financial giving to the work of the church.

In short, God expects us to live out our membership vows to support the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service.

We need not worry that God demands more than we are capable of. God is the gardener. God digs up the soil. God brings forth in us the fruits of our natural abilities, if – and this is a big IF – if we allow ourselves to be used by him.

II. Spreading manure.

This is where the manure comes in.

Most of us do not like to talk about manure. It's not a topic for polite society.

One commentator suggests that, “The manure around our roots is the very blood of the one who pleads for our justification before God, the one through whom we may offer up the fruits of the kingdom to our Creator.” (Daniel G. Deffenbaugh) In other words, Jesus' blood is the manure, the fertilizer, the nutrient that feeds our hungry souls. Jesus digs up and tends and fertilizes what the first Adam left untended.

Augustine wrote, “[Manure] is a sign of humility.” But for some arrogant folks, there is not enough manure in the world to lead them to repentance.

The story is told of a young and fearless preacher, who had a problem with a somewhat worldly parishioner. This parishioner:

“...would remark sarcastically every Sunday as he shook the preacher’s hand at the door, ‘You got them today preacher!’ Sunday after Sunday this fellow never seemed to feel that he needed to repent and always felt that the sermon was for everybody else. Then one Sunday there was a bad snow storm and the preacher and this one fellow were the only ones that could show up. The preacher seized the opportunity and preached his entire three point sermon on, ‘Hell, Fire, and Damnation.’ Well, the one congregant again walked out the door and shook the preacher’s hand and said, ‘If they had been here today preacher, you would have gotten them real good!’” (C. Robert Allred)

I’m not a hellfire and brimstone style preacher, as you may be aware. But I do think that, at times, we all need the humility that Augustine mentions. The humility that comes with contemplating the manure of our lives. If we pause to take stock of our own manure, we might be less critical of the manure our neighbor is dealing with.

Jesus spreads it around, so we can’t miss it. He pours out his own blood and mingles it with our mess. In the process, he brings out of our human predicament fat, delicious, juicy fruit.

Again, there is that big IF. IF we allow him into our lives. IF we allow him to tend our spiritual trees. IF we allow him to spread manure over our roots and allow it to nourish us.

The other choice – the choice we often make – is to avoid the manure. To leave it hidden away in some deep dark shed in the far reaches of our souls. If we keep it hidden, we can pretend it isn’t there.

Oh, but God knows it’s there. So might as well let him dig up the soil and spread the manure. Might as well cooperate with God, so that the worst parts of ourselves, and the most painful parts of our lives, can be transformed by His grace into goodness; into the beautiful fruits of His love.

III. Trusting the gardener; he never gives up.

We can trust in the Gardener. He never gives up. God promises that he will never give up on us. Listen to some of the biblical evidence of this:

- Adam and Eve disobeyed the very First Rule. But God never gave up.
- Abraham wandered, and Sarah laughed. But God never gave up.
- Moses hid and shook with fear. But God never gave up.
- Saul went insane. But God never gave up.
- David plotted against Uriah. But God never gave up.
- Ahaz sold out to Assyria. But God never gave up.
- Israel fell into pieces. But God never gave up.
- The Jewish people became exiles. But God never gave up.
- John the Baptist was beheaded. But God never gave up.
- Peter denied he even knew him. But God never gave up.
- The disciples all ran away. But God never gave up. (thanks to Brett Blair for biblical sources)

God never gives up.

He digs in the soil of his Creation. He digs in the soil of the Church. He digs in the soil of our souls. And he nourishes us with his own blood, spilt for us. He never gives up.

God's love never gives up.

God never gives up on you or me, no matter what we've done...no matter what has been done to us. God never gives up. He is continually at work, digging in the soil of our lives, spreading manure to keep us humble and to provide us with the nutrients we need. He is continually at work, renewing all of creation.

Closing.

As human beings, we easily condemn ourselves and others over wrongs both big and small. We give up on ourselves, believing we are unsalvageable failures. We give up on others, believing they will “always” hurt us and can “never” change. God’s love is different from human love. God’s love never gives up on us. God, in His great love for you and me, is the God of second chances. And third and fourth and hundredth chances.

Richard Fairchild tells a story about Johnny,

“...who was going home one day past his grandfather's house with a couple of his chums. As they passed the house they spied the old gentleman out on his sun porch in his rocking chair with a big black book (the bible) on his lap reading rather intently.

“‘What's your grandfather doing’, asked one of Johnny's friends.

“‘Oh -- grandpa -- he's cramming for the finals,’ Johnny replied.”

God is the owner of the fig tree. And God is also the gardener.

God’s nature is to seek justice and to offer mercy. God does expect us to live in accordance with his laws. At the same time, he knows that we are incapable of doing so.

Therefore, God sends his only Son to live among us, to dig around in the soil of our souls and to give nourishment to our spirits. God wants us to bear fruit. God gives us second chances, third chances -- hundreds of chances -- to bear spiritual and practical fruit for his kingdom.

This morning, may we let go of whatever is troubling us. May we let go of whatever separates us, one from another. May we receive God’s love, a love that never fails, a love that never gives up on you or me.

Amen.