

On Bearing Fruit

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Ok, so here we are along our journey, 3rd week of Lent. Jesus is edging towards Jerusalem in Luke. He knows that troubles lay ahead. We are not supposed to know about the Good Friday crucifixion, just hearing the ominous minor key of John Williams brilliant soundtrack in the movie *Star Wars* warns that *Darth Vader* and the air he breathes, the Dark Side, is near.

Of course, it isn't so simple. But Jesus is speaking in this passage of tragedies contemporary to him: Pontius Pilate has ordered the massacre of pilgrims in Jerusalem, and the other incident, some sort of structural collapse, has killed Galileans. People within Jesus' earshot are likely applying Hebrew logic: that surely this was divine retribution, those victims must have done something wrong to deserve such awful fates. Jesus takes pains to be explicit, a resounding "no" to logic that associates tragedy perceived moral shortcomings of the victim.

He then tells this strange parable of a fig tree that has not grown fruit for 3 years. The owner wants it cut down. The gardener asks for patience, one more year. Some manure (many Bible translations say fertilizer, but the Greek clearly indicates animal excrement). The tree gets a reprieve, but judgment is near.

Jesus' point in all of this:

- Don't be assessing the moral status of others.
- Worry more about yourself.
- Repent – literally, turn your mind around 180 degrees.
- Be open today to what God's vision.
- Life is unpredictable, life is short.

Who is the subject of your moral assessment at this moment? Vladimir Putin? He's cruel for sure. What about that son-of-a-gun you know and with whom you cannot have a civilized conversation? Or, that person who cut in front of you on the highway? So many people in need of an *attitude adjustment*.

But here is the thing, and I think you know where I'm going: life is short. Life is also very stressful, and often doesn't bring out the best in you and me. God's love is patient and kind, and transformative. Today, not tomorrow, is the time to change MY attitude. Jesus is talking directly to me, and to you, from this Bible story and parable.

Fruit bearing plants are really a thing for Luke the Gospel storyteller. Luke has John the Baptist preaching about the fruit of repentance as being just, interpersonal relationships in chapter 3.¹ In chapter 6, Luke has Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Plain proclaiming that a good tree bears good fruit, just as a good person produces good from the goodness deep down. In chapter 8, Jesus tells the parable of the sower of seeds,

¹ Working Preacher commentary by Jeremy L. Williams, found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-5>

and how people with good hearts hear God's word, hold fast to it, and patiently produce fruit.

Bearing fruit comes from the very depth of love in us, the seeds that have been planted deep in us. It isn't just slight alterations to our attitudes and actions. When I arrived at St. Andrew's, I believe that it was Rev. Catherine who left a plant in my office to welcome me. That plant never flourished in my office. In fact, it sat there, and languished. I felt guilty. I knew that it reflected my neglect. But I knew where it needed to go, home to Tracey's love and care. Now she is very humble, never bragging about her green thumb. But in her care and with the love of a home and more attention, that plant is flourishing.

This world and its prejudice, racism, judgmentalism, individualism, patriarchy, homophobia, militarism, consumerism, and so many "isms" that I can't think to name right now. The world needs the unconditional love and forgiveness, and compassion that must come from the depth of who you are: not your money, not your tweaking of ethical choices, not giving up this or that for Lent. The world, and we, need a complete 180-degree turnaround at times in the way we think, now. When we start there, the fruit will come. Amen.