

Lent 3C, 2010

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Title: The Lazy Fig Tree

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One week later and we're still on the farm. Last week it was the fox and the hen. This week we have the fig tree, along with its owner, and the gardener.

For three years now the owner has looked for figs from this one particular tree. And for three years there have been none. Not one solitary fig.

For the owner, this tree is a waste of space. It's not doing him any good. It's not making him any money. He's ready to cut it down and clear it out to make room for another tree, one that will bear fruit.

Notice what's wrong with the fig tree. It's not dead. It's not even dying. It's not an evil tree—it's not fighting with the other trees or corrupting the rest of the garden.

The problem with this tree is that it simply is not bearing fruit. It's a fig tree. The whole point of having a fig tree is to get figs from it. This is a green, growing, nice-looking tree. But it's not bearing fruit.

This fig tree was simply living for itself. All of the nutrients it took in were just being used to keep the tree growing. And even though it was a nice, full, beautiful tree, it did not fulfill the purpose that the owner had planted it for. The owner planted this tree and gave the gardener care of it so that it would bear figs. But the tree was not producing figs.

Too often this is our problem.

We're not criminals or mass-murderers or terrorists. We get along with one another and we stay out of trouble. From the looks of things we're all nice, upstanding people, just like this nice looking fig tree.

The problem is God did not create you just to be a nice-looking tree. He created you to bear fruit. God created you to bear fruit. Not just to be a nice, pleasant person, but to bear fruit in your life.

What sort of fruit? There are many, but the focus in this chapter is on repentance. Repentance is the first fruit of a Christian life.

When we think of repentance, it's usually a negative thing. Now I don't mean a "bad" thing, but we think of repentance as not doing something, we think of repentance as to stop doing something bad. So if you're lying or cheating or being selfish, to repent means to stop lying or cheating or being selfish.

Now this is a part of repentance, but it's not the whole deal.

To repent doesn't just mean to stop doing something bad, but to have a change of heart, to change your mind and your attitude.

Our heart and mind are naturally focused on ourselves. Our sinful nature means that we are curved in on ourselves and put ourselves first. We trust in ourselves and our own abilities to get us through whatever we face.

To repent is to change this way of thinking. When we repent, our eyes are drawn outside of ourselves. We look to God for salvation and we look to our neighbors and their needs.

That fig tree was only concerned about itself. It was using all the nutrients it brought in to keep itself alive and growing. But none of those nutrients went outside of itself, towards bearing fruit and creating more trees.

At the center of each fruit are seeds. Fruit is the way that trees make more trees. Whether its apples or oranges or peaches or pears, there are seeds in the center of the fruit, which are planted and make more trees.

The connection is obvious.

God doesn't create Christians out of nothing. He could if He wanted to, but He chooses not to. God uses Christians and their fruit to make more Christians.

You are here today because God used someone to plant that seed of faith in your life- a parent or grandparent, a husband or wife, a teacher or pastor or friend, someone planted a seed in your life. That seed was wrapped in good, tasty, fruit- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And that is what God has made you to do- to bear fruit, and in your good works enfolding the gospel.

That is your calling as a Christian, and that is our calling as a church.

The story is told of a factory in a certain town. This factory was known far and wide as the model factory, the standard for the rest of the factories in the state. It was efficient, it was well-run, the workers were happy.

One day a manager from another factory came for a tour. He had heard wonderful things about this factory and thought that he could learn from it. So the factory owner took him for a tour. Everything was impressive. The factory was immaculate and all the machines were in working order. The workers seemed happy and each did their job with enthusiasm.

Finally the tour was drawing to a close, and the guest turned to the owner of the factory and asked, "Can I see your shipping department?" The owner looked confused. "What do you

mean?” “Well,” said the guest, “What do you do with all the products that your factory makes? Don’t you ship them out?” “No,” said the owner, “everything we make here are just the parts to keep this factory going.”

Brothers and sisters, we run the risk of becoming like this factory, of just doing enough to keep this church going.

Especially as we deal with our current financial issues, our temptation will be to focus in on ourselves, and just keep the tree alive, or keep the factory open. But the tree is there to bear fruit, and the factory exists to create products to be shipped out and enjoyed by others.

We have something wonderful to share with the world around us, and too often we just keep it to ourselves.

So where do we go from here?

It’s time to hear the words of the vinedresser, the gardener. When the owner is ready to chop down the unfruitful tree, the gardener steps in, he intercedes for the tree. He begs the owner for one more year. And he proposes two things:

First, he says, “Leave it alone.” This word in Greek is the same as the word, “forgive.” The gardener begs the owner to forgive the tree.

That’s where things start for us, too. We confess our sins, we repent of our fruitlessness, both as individuals and as a congregation, and Jesus will forgive our sins. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us of all unrighteousness.

It begins with forgiveness.

Then comes the care of the gardener. He promises to dig around the tree and put down a layer of fertilizer to feed the tree.

And that’s what Jesus continues to do for us. He feeds us with His word and with His body and blood. These are the fertilizer that give us growth and the nutrients we need to bear fruit.

Forgiveness and food- that’s Jesus’ solution.

But there’s a time-frame. One more year. The owner and the gardener will not be patient forever. The fig tree has already had three years. In another year, if the tree does not bear fruit, it will be cut down.

This story, this parable is open ended. We never find out if the tree bears fruit the next year. We never find out if it is spared or if it is cut down.

That’s the point of Jesus’ telling it. There is still time. There is still time for the gardener to do His work in our lives. There is still time for you.