

Sermon – Luke 13:1-9
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
3 Lent – Year C
24 March 2019

“Fertilized to Bear Fruit”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It is spring break here at Grace School, and for many other schools, too. I, of course, live with a faculty member and three students of Grace School, and they have abandoned me. They are spending some time in that ever-popular spring break destination, St. Paul, MN. Their absence seems as good a time as any to make a confession: I am never quite as surprised as I am when someone tells me that my children are good. Now, to be sure, I think my kids are pretty awesome. But the things I hear from their teachers at parent-teacher conferences or from other parents after a play date? Your child is so good, they say. Helpful, kind, willing to share, polite. Perfect. *Perfect?* I usually manage to stammer a quick “thank you,” but on the inside I’m trying to figure out whose child they’ve been spending time with, because it doesn’t sound like one of mine. The description doesn’t quite match up with the reality I see at home. To be fair, this is true for many kids. I’m glad that our children can pass themselves off as responsible citizens out in the world, and that they know that their mother and I are safe; that we are people in front of whom they can be less-than-perfect versions of themselves. Still, I know they’re not perfect. They’re good *and* bad; saint *and* sinner, as we Lutherans might say. Just like the rest of us. Truth be told, as one of the gardeners in the Lyle Family Vineyard, I know that they don’t always bear good fruit.
2. We are, of course, constantly (if often subconsciously) evaluating the goodness and badness of other people. We fall into too-easy judgmentalism,

particularly of those who are different, or those whom we simply do not like. We revel in *schadenfreude*, delighting in misfortune that befalls those who have it coming (college admissions scandal, anyone?). We sort out people as “good” or “bad” based on what happens to them. To be sure, we’re not quite as literal in our application of this as were people in Jesus’ day, although there’s always some yahoo on television that is willing to blame the latest hurricane on the supposed moral decay of America. We don’t think *that we think* that bad things happen to people because they deserve it, yet such thinking permeates our language. When things are going well, we count ourselves blessed, with or without the hashtag. When we see someone suffering we might say, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” So is the one suffering outside of God’s grace? We are hardwired, it seems, with the concept of karma. Good people have good things happen to them, we imagine; bad people have bad things happen to them. Why else would the question of why bad things happen to good people be so persistent? And most importantly, when bad things happen to me, the first question I ask is: Why? Why me? Why this? Why now? Why, Lord?!

3. Such questions drive the narrative today in Luke’s gospel. In a story that evokes the recent massacres at the Christchurch mosques, Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, it seems that Pontius Pilate had recently sent soldiers to murder Galilean pilgrims while they were worshipping at the Temple. Some in the crowd believe that since these people were killed, they must have deserved it. They must have been *bad* to suffer so *badly*. And what of those eighteen people crushed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Did they have it coming? Did God wait for just the right moment when eighteen truly awful people were standing in the same spot to take the divine finger and flick the tower so that it would crush them? **No**, Jesus says. These tragedies result from the brokenness of the world we inhabit, but Jesus refuses to blame the victims. Pilate murdered the worshippers because Pilate was an evil murderer, not because they deserved

- to die. The tower fell upon the people because sometimes towers collapse and, sometimes, people are standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.
4. Jesus steadfastly refuses to answer the “why” question of our suffering. Bad things don’t always happen for a reason, or at least not one of simple causation. We would prefer to speculate safely from some mountaintop of moral authority, judging others, distant from their pain and aloof from reality. But Jesus demands that his hearers take a look at their own lives. Don’t worry about the sins of others. Repent, Jesus says, or you will all perish. And then, to move us from the “why” question to the “who” question, Jesus tells a story.
 5. The landowner and his gardener are standing in the vineyard. In the midst of the grapevines the owner had, on a whim it seems, planted a fig tree. But the tree wasn’t figging; there was no fruit to be found. Hadn’t been for years. Quite understandably, the landowner wants to cut both his losses and the tree. Time to chop it down. Why let it use soil without producing fruit? The gardener, however, knows a thing or two about fig trees. He knows it needs tending, feeding, and time. He makes a proposal: give me a year. I’ll dig around in the dirt and spread some good, thick manure, and we’ll see what happens. And what happens? Who knows? We don’t even know if the owner agreed to the plan, let alone if it worked. But that’s not the point, because the parable of the fig tree isn’t about the fig tree. It’s about the gardener who has come to answer the “who” question that matters so much more than the “why” of our suffering.
 6. Jesus calls his hearers to repent, to bear fruit. After all, whether it’s from a collapsing tower or a medical condition or something else entirely, we’re all going to die. This isn’t a threat; it’s reality. Why, then, to quote Isaiah, do you spend your money and your time on things that neither nourish nor satisfy? What are you waiting for? We live in a world in which suffering is ever

present; why are you not doing good and bearing fruit? Well, Jesus knows that we are sad, fruitless fig trees, worthy of cutting down. But Jesus doesn't judge as the world judges; Jesus shows grace. Jesus shows mercy. Jesus is the gardener who says, "Let it alone," or in Luke's Greek, "*Aphes*." There are two Greek words that are translated as "forgive" in the New Testament, and this is one of them. It's what Jesus says from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." "Father, let them alone," he might have said. "Father, forgive this fig tree, it knows not what it does." The gardener is not simply sparing the fig tree; he is forgiving it. He is willing to dig around in the dirt and spread manure so that it can live. Jesus is not simply letting us be; he is forgiving us. He is willing to enter into the dirt and the suffering of this world, all the way to the point of mingling his own blood with our suffering and giving his dead body into the earth that his lifeblood would enliven us. So that fertilized, we would begin to bear fruit. With Christ alive in us, what else could we do?

7. And so we go, to the good and the bad and those in between, to be gardeners for the sake of the Gardener. We don't go to wonder what those who suffer have done to deserve it, nor whether or not they are worthy of our help. The "whys" and the "whethers" are the wrong questions. The world needs not our speculation but instead our faithful service. We go with an answer to the "who" question. Who will save this world and its people? Jesus will. Jesus, the faithful gardener who coaxes fruit from once dead limbs. Jesus, who enters into suffering and opens up resurrection on the far side. Jesus, who forgives us and lets go of our sin that we might go and do good today. Reflecting on this passage, Robert Farrar Capon writes: "Jesus I can love. He does everything, I do nothing; I just trust him. It is a nifty arrangement, and for a deadbeat like me, it is the only one that can possibly work. As long as I am in him, I bear fruit. As long as his death feeds my roots, I will never be cut down."

8. Friends, you are forgiven, fertilized, and free forever. Go, and bear fruit. Bring hope to the suffering, and do it now. What are you waiting for? We will never have all of our “whys” answered. So it goes. For the future of resurrection hope is already blooming, and in that hope we discover what truly nourishes and satisfies. His name is Jesus, and he is all we need. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.