

“Bearing Fruit”

Luke 13:1-9

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+13:1-9

Dr. David W. Swink

Chilson Hills Church, Brighton, Michigan

March 7, 2010

“Life is not fair, but it is still good.”

This sermon is about fertilizer. The Greek word Jesus uses is *koprion*. It is a crude, impolite word. The actual translation is much stronger than manure. I'll leave that to your imagination. This is such an usual word that it only shows up in this one place in the New Testament. Usually sermons are not so earthy. We preachers try to clean it up a little bit. Make life acceptable, easy, and light. When we do clean this passage up, we are not following Jesus very well. Jesus told the farmer to spread a little manure on the barren tree.

Will Rogers did not have any qualms about such farm fresh language. He said that Methodist (Baptist) preachers are a lot like manure. Spread them around, they'll do a lot of good. Pile them all together in one place, they get to stinking.

As I said, this sermon is about manure spread around to produce living, vibrant Christ-like lives. I want us to consider how we become Christians who bear much fruit. It seems that we think we can become living vibrant Christians by osmosis. Garrison Keillor says that many people think they can become Christians just by attending Church every once in awhile. He says, “You can become a Christian by going to church just about as easily as you can become an automobile by sleeping in the garage.”

If you want to be a growing Christian, then you need some manure spread all around you. Like I said, this sermon is about fertilizer. To be fruitful, we need manure. Let's take a step by step approach to this spiritual gardening concept. We must first accept the reality of the ground upon which we are planted. We are planted in a world that is very difficult and exceedingly unfair. Second, we must face the reality of our emotional responses to this world. We must turn and face our deepest fears. Next, we must accept the wonderfully smelly gift of manure spread all around within our lives. Finally, we can grow into the fruity person God desires us to become.

OUR SOIL: Life on Planet Earth is not fair!

In this passage, Jesus questioners are wondering about several tragedies that have just occurred in Jerusalem. A number of Galileans have been slaughtered by Roman troops while worshipping in the temple. Almost simultaneously a group of contracted workers are killed while building up the fortress tower next to the pools of Siloam. According to the prevailing belief at this time, and in our time, these people must have done something wrong. When tragedy strikes it must be because we have sinned. This is the interpretation that Pat Robertson used when he declared that God had punished the Haitian people for choices they made in previous centuries. The opposite is also true according to this mistaken view of God; when blessings abound, it is because we are doing good. So many people believe this trash even today.

Most of us live with a Walt Disney World fantasy. We go to Disney World every once in awhile to reinforce this myth. We truly believe that everything is controlled. At Disney world all the garbage is unseen, trucked out underground. Unpleasant things like garbage and manure are never seen or smelled. For the day or days that we visit the world stands still. We laugh and play and we hate to go back home. Driving up I-75, we express our lamentation that life is not always like Disney World.

We really believe our fantasy that diseases, accidents, and freak storms are not a part of the real world. When something bad happens to good people, we are shocked and dismayed. It should not be this way, we say. We blame God. Or, we blame the tragic person for doing something really bad. When our fantasy of an ideal world is challenged, and then, we say that we can no longer believe in God. We get angry with God for the injustices and the difficulties of the world. Let us step back and take a look at this fantasy.

God created the world with choices. The first men and women had a choice: follow God and live in God's Garden of Eden, or follow their own desires and create a messy world in opposition to God. Since the beginning of human time, we have created the mess. Human beings poor choices have multiplied so that the planet we now inhabit has little similarity to the garden God created. Through the millenium humans have created a difficult, unfair, and tragic place.

But, you will say to me, what about tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, and El Nino's. Again, let us begin at the beginning. If we believe that God created the world as a perfect environment for us at the beginning of time and only occasionally intervenes, then we can fault God for natural disasters. But, if we accept the reality that God is still in process creating the world, then we can understand natural disasters differently.

- If you build your home on or near a fault line, you are choosing disaster at some time.
- If you build your home on a flood plain, then you are choosing disaster.
- If you build your home on tornado alley, then expect the big wind to blow through.

The world is still being created. Creative power is both constructive and destructive. The creative process is not personal. The world just keeps rolling along.

The universe is in the midst of a great energetic powerful creative process. In our rationalized world we do our best to control what we can and ignore the rest. Centuries before we were tainted with this Rationalist point of view the Apostle Paul wrote of God's ongoing creative process:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:22-28 (NRSV)

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=romans+8:22-28

Let us accept the reality of our world. We live in a difficult, dangerous, unfair world. God is still at work creating our world. God is actively working to undo the damage we have done to God's world. God continues to redeem this broken planet and grow God's Kingdom here on earth. If we are going to help our God then we have to have clear eyes filled with trust in God because on this planet:

- Children catch diseases and suffer and die;
- People of all ages die from cancer;
- Men die in accidents too frequently;
- Women die from heart disease; and
- All of us will die of something!

We are not guaranteed anything, but the blessing of today and hope for tomorrow.

OUR CHALLENGE: Face your fears honestly and directly!

When we look at life in this world as it is, not with the Disney fantasy of a world that we want it to be, then we are tempted to run away. It is very difficult to come to grips with our mortality. Like the fruit tree in today's parable, we only have three years to occupy the soil. Our time is limited. We cannot control our ultimate destiny or the destiny of our children. Our fear of being out of control drives us to do some very strange things in very strange places. Let me share with you a story from the waiting room of a hospital chaplain.

"One day I received a call to come sit with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was in surgery. Earlier in the week, the girl had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she could no longer see. At the hospital, a CAT scan confirmed that a large tumor was pressing on the girl's optic nerve, and she was scheduled for surgery as soon as possible.

On the day of the operation, I found her mother sitting under the fluorescent lights in the waiting room beside an ashtray full of cigarette butts. She smelled as if she had puffed every one of them, although she was not smoking when I got there. She was staring at a patch of carpet in front of her, "with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look that warned me to move slowly. I sat down beside her. She came to, and after some small talk she told me just how awful it was. She even told me why it had happened.

"It's my punishments she said, "for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick." Then she started crying, so hard that what she said next came out like a siren: "Now I'm supposed to stop, but I can't stop. I'm going to kill my own child!"

This was hard for me to hear. I decided to forego reflective listening and concentrate on remedial theology instead. "I don't believe in a God like that," I said. "The God I know wouldn't do something like that." The only problem with my response was that it messed with the mother's worldview at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one. I may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter's brain tumor, but at the moment she could not. If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to *be* the reason. At least that way she could get a grip on the catastrophe." (Barbara Brown-Taylor, "Life-giving Fear" in The Christian Century, March 4, 1998, p.229)

The only connection between this mother's smoking and her daughter's brain tumor was in the mother's head. She could not face the real fear, so she controlled it as best she could. Her choice was illogical, but for a time she at least had some measure of control over her fear. The problem is that her choice would ultimately drive her away from God.

My friends let us give up our fanciful illusions of immortality. We are limited. Let us face it. We are finite. Let us not run from it. We are mortal. Let us not deny it. God gives you today. God gives you a family today. God gives you children today. On this fallen, broken, evil tainted planet, there is no guarantee! We are given today. That is all. When you can face this reality, you are ready to hear Jesus as he speaks the words of abundant grace and mercy.

OUR INVITATION: Spread God's grace all around the roots!

In the rocky soil of Israel, every place to plant a tree is precious. Normally, a fruit tree will take three years to mature and bear fruit. If the farmer plants a poor quality tree that will not bear fruit in the appointed time he pulls it up and replants. He cannot afford to have wasted ground. This is the condition in Jesus' story. By all rights, the trees appointed time was up. The logical consequence of the tree not bearing fruit was to be uprooted and burned in the fire. The gardener requests more time. Time is granted. Here is God's grace at work.

Grace is God's no strings attached love. Grace is God's willingness to grant more time, money, and energy into a person even though they have not responded. The instructions are to cultivate, fertilize, and tenderly care for this unfruitful, adolescent plant. God's abundant grace is evident in this story. God's grace is the manure to help the tree grow to be the fruitful tree God created it to be.

Bishop William Willimon of the United Methodist Churches was visiting in Innsbruck, Austria and wrote: "One afternoon we were admiring the unbelievably beautiful geraniums growing all along the front of the inn. They were the healthiest, brightest red geraniums we had ever seen. I said, 'How red are these flowers! How do you do it? What sort of fertilizer do you use?' '*Blut*,' the landlady replied. *Blut*. Blood. My husband brings me a gallon of blood from the slaughterhouse each week. These flowers grow best with blood."

This sermon is about manure. Earthy, smelly bloody manure. Without the manure spread around and within your very roots, you will die. You are a limited, finite, mortal creature. But, God gives you the gift of manure spread around your roots so that you can grow to be a most beautiful person. God's grace is the time, energy, and manure that God invests in you so that you may grow to be a fruity person contributing much to the building up of God's kingdom of peace on planet earth.

You see, God loves this world so much, that God sent Christ so that whoever puts their trust in Christ will not die, but have eternal life. (**John 3:16**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+3:16) Christ's death on the cross; Christ's bloody, earthy death on the cross; allows you to experience the rich, life-giving blood flowing onto your roots and into your life. Without this manure, you will not bear fruit in God's orchard.

YOUR OPPORTUNITY: Be fruitful!

What is this about being fruitful? What is the reason that bearing fruit is so important? After all, we are not trees. That is true. The metaphor of a tree bearing fruit is just that, a word picture. But, the fruit that Jesus is talking about is a spiritual fruit that grows and matures in the life of persons committed to living Christ-like lives in the special day that God gives them. The Apostle Paul took Jesus' story and put it into a Greek/Roman way of thinking that is more understandable to us in the West. The Apostle Paul wrote:

But what happens when we live God's way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Galatians 5:22-23 (Message)
www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=galatians+5:22-23

A fruitful life lived within the Spirit of Jesus Christ is our opportunity! We can live differently! We can respond to people differently! We can give away God's grace!

- Have you ever said you wanted more **patience**? Christ will grow within you a willingness to stick with things until God brings about a victory.
- Have you ever breathed a frustrated prayer and asked for more **love**? Christ will strengthen your focus and affection for others.
- Would you like more **joy**, true deep down belly laughing joy in your life? Christ will bring into your life exuberance for life everyday!
- What about **peace**? Do you long for just a few moments of peace? Christ will give you serenity in all areas of your life no matter what is happening around you.
- Do you sometimes reflect upon the way you respond to your family and wish that you could be just a little **kinder** and less critical? Christ will bring about within your heart and soul a sense of compassion for others.
- As you take an inventory of the actual way you are living each day, do you wish for more **self-control**? Christ will give you the strength to marshal and direct your energy wisely.
- Let's be honest. Are you as **good** as you want to be? Christ will bring into your life a deep conviction that holiness permeates all things and all people.
- Are you as **faithful** to God, to your spouse, to your children as you wish you could be? Christ will give you the courage to stand by your commitments with a loyal spirit.
- And, do you sometimes wish for just enough **gentleness** to say the right word that comforts that pain filled person who calls you? Christ will give you the spiritual awareness that God is in control and you do not need to force people or situations to fit your will.

When we talk about the fruit of a Spirit-filled life we are talking about being so connected to the source of all life that we naturally live bearing Spiritual fruit. It is not that we are trying hard. It is not that we are reaching for perfection. Rather, Spiritual Fruit grows naturally when one is open to being fertilized by the blood of Jesus Christ.

You can choose to grow fruit in God's orchard. That is your free choice. Jesus' story does not have an ending. You must create your own. It is true that we live in an uncontrollable, dangerous, and difficult world. As you face this reality, will you open up, and keep open, the root system of your life and invite God's fertilizing love into your very core? If so, then you will grow to be a beautiful fruity person. You can also choose to keep your roots closed. Stay in your "control fantasy" and face the logical consequences of your choice. God's desire is that you grow to be a beautiful person sharing the fruit of God's Spirit. God's desire is that you live and share peace, patience, love, joy, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in your everyday living. You choose how this story ends. I hope you choose wisely.

"Life is not fair, but it is still good."