

May I speak to you this day in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those of you who walked by the backyard at the Rectory last summer will know that I love gardening. Last year I put in a small garden, with tomatoes and beans and onions, and in the fall I expanded it quite a bit in advance of this coming summer. When I'm not out on the river in our small boat chasing pickerel (and believe me I am counting the days; 55 to go as of this morning before that bait on a hook can go back in the water...) you will usually find me in our backyard, watering and weeding and shovelling sheep manure, or doing whatever other bits of work that God has set before me.

This week Jesus offers us a metaphor about gardening that I would to invite us to think a little bit more about, especially in this Season of Lent, as we are called to reflect upon both the nature of death and the promise of new life: the parable of the fig tree.

Now the first thing to remember about parables is that they are not meant to be definitive statements or declarations — they are stories. They are powerful short stories with multiple layers of meaning. I often say to

children that parables are the sorts of stories that once you take them out of the “box” you can never really put them back in.¹ Like the pieces of a toy that come all neatly packaged and organized in a box in shrink wrap, once you start to undo the wrapping you never really put all pieces back into the box in the way they once were. Parables expand; parables grow; parables, in a sense, take on a life of their own.

And isn't that they way with all living things? Take trees for instance, or a fig tree in particular. A fig tree begins its life as a seed: as bud on another tree. And eventually that bud turns into a piece of fruit that protects the seed, and in time the fruit falls to the ground, and gets covered in soil, and is nourished by water — and in time the warmth of the sun and the nutrients in the soil causes the seed to germinate — and then slowly it pushes its way back up through the soil, back into the sunlight. And over time it pushes further and further upwards towards the heavens as it grows leaves and branches, and still more leaves and branches grow, and the birds nest in the branches and the animals seek shelter under its canopy. And finally some bees come along and help to pollinate the new

¹ The Rev. Dr. Jerome Berryman's image of a parable as a “gold box” in the *Godly Play* curriculum has frequently been an inspiration for me when exegeting the parables with both children and adults. For a video example see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4I9GiHqIshU&list=PLd8UFTdIPH2cdkUutFNa1_8Pp_nyyZytc&index=2

trees buds, and all of a sudden this new tree begins producing fruit; fruit that then falls to the earth, and begins the cycle all over again.

Then Jesus told them this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Too often we forget as the Church, as the living body of Christ, that we are in many ways just like that fig tree. This week I read a great article online by a young clergywoman who's living in Ohio² — her name is Rev. Sarah Juist and she serves a Presbyterian Church in Central Ohio — and Sarah described how as a young pastor she often feels she is called to do the work of a gardener, but is somehow expected to do so with a wrench and a screwdriver. She's called to do the work of a gardener but is expected to do so with a wrench and a screwdriver. Now what does she mean by that?

² The Rev. Sarah Juist, "Gardening with Screwdrivers: A Millennial Minister on Change," available online at: <https://preachingjeremiah.wordpress.com/2019/03/20/gardening-with-screwdrivers-a-millennial-minister-on-change/>

Well, too often Sarah argues — and I think there is truth to this too — too often we the faithful think of the Church as a sort of machine: as a complex object that is man made like a car or a bicycle or a snowblower, rather than recognizing its true identity as a living organism; as something that is created and sustained and nourished by the very breath of God. And what ends up happening is that we end up bringing mechanical tools and mechanical thinking to challenges that actually require us to think like gardeners and to not think like mechanics.

Let me give you an example. Let's say a congregation hosts an annual event; maybe a dinner or an annual sale (and it really doesn't matter what it is; it could be roast beef or salmon or chicken; it could be a rummage sale, a Christmas sale, a spring cleaning sale - it really doesn't matter what the event is.) Let's say a congregation hosts an annual event, and for many years, maybe even twenty years, the event is a roaring success. Lots of people attend, and lots of money is raised, and all kinds of people come and say how much fun they had and that they had a really good time. But then, after twenty years have passed, the event begins to wane in popularity. Fewer people come, and there are fewer people to volunteer, and the whole event is becoming just more and more stress than its worth.

Now what's one of the first things that we as the members of the church often do? (And I say "we" here very intentionally because we the clergy are fully part of this process too; we all share in this behaviour together.) Often, thinking like mechanics, one of the first things we try to do is "fix" whatever is wrong. "We need better advertising," we say to ourselves: we better 'tighten down' that screw. "We need to ask for volunteers earlier in the year," we say to ourselves: we'd better 'tighten down' that screw. "We need a new menu or a new line up of items to sell," we say to ourselves: and at that point we pull out the proverbial jumper cables, and we hook them up to the battery, and someone shouts "everybody stand back now - CLEAR!" And like a well trained mechanic we expect to then be able to turn the key over and for the car start running seamlessly: for the event to keep running like it always did before.

Except the Church is not a car, and we are not cars! The Church is not a machine and we are not machines. The Church, like each of us, is a living creature: a beautiful living tree. The Church is a beautiful fig tree standing out there in the garden. And all this time we've been thinking like mechanics that we haven't been noticing the gardening realities that are all around us. "Fewer families have a parent staying at home now so there are a lot fewer hours in the day to volunteer" — that root of the tree has now

‘shrivelled up’ and died. “Our population centres in this area have shifted; it takes three people to run a farm now with all the automation that we have, not fifteen as it once did, so there are fewer people living here” — that root of the tree has ‘shrivelled up’ and died. “Our congregation is aging and we just don’t have the strength to set the tables and run the cash box any more.” And now we are all staring at a barren fig tree, standing out there in the yard with no fruit on it, and the owner shouts “Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”

But what does the gardener then say to the owner in reply? I’d like us to listen today to the voice of God speaking to us through the voice of the gardener. “Sir,” he replies, “let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

You see, the gardener isn’t afraid of cutting down the tree down. The gardener has no problem saying, “well, I’ll dig around it and fertilize it and do my best,” but if it doesn’t grow then I’ll cut it down and use it for firewood. Because the gardener knows that even the ashes from the tree’s wood are going to become nutrients for the soil. Even in its death the tree is going to create space in the garden for new shoots to grow, and

suddenly where there was once shade now there is sunlight; and where there was once dried and parched land under a barren canopy now the rains can work upon the soil. Where there was once just a failing event, a failing church dinner or sale, now there is energy for something new — for a new way of being together as the body of Christ — for a new way of serving the community. Maybe it's a new pastoral visiting program to reach those seniors who are shut in on their farms; maybe it's a new Bible study to spiritually feed those tired volunteers; who knows what it will be? The point is there is now room in the garden where that old fig tree used to stand for new life to grow! Because the gardener knows that no matter what, the cycle of life continues in this world, and there is nothing, not even death, that can stop its life-giving power. Not even cutting down the fig tree can and returning its ashes to the dust can stop God from using it to create new life. Indeed, sometimes cutting down the fig tree, and spreading its life-giving ashes as fertilizer over the soil, is the most faithful thing that a gardener can do.

May God grant us the grace as Christians — as the stewards of these beautiful forests of trees that are our lives lived together in Christ — to embrace our ministries as gardeners. To be fearless in our knowledge of the Paschal mystery: of that mystery which is the very heart of our faith.

That sacred mystery which teaches us that life ultimately begets death, but that death always produces new-life. And that beautiful, God-given cycle of re-creation can never, ever be broken. May God grant us the grace and the faith this week to put down our wrenches, and put down our screwdrivers, and instead pick up our shears, and pick up our shovels, and with faith, lovingly spread some manure.

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew J. Brown
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