

Lent 3C
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
March 20, 2022

Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I confess to you my brothers and sisters, my thumb is not very green. The plants that do best in my home and office are those that thrive under conditions of benign neglect. In fact, as I wrote that first sentence I remembered that it had been a good while since I watered the plants on my lanai and I went to take care of that. And, of course, today's Gospel reading is about the care of a fig tree.

Before we delve into that, though, let's talk for a moment about parables. Jesus often spoke to the crowds using parables. a simple story that Jesus used to teach something about the kingdom of God. It is written in Mark that Jesus explained the parables to his disciples in private. And few of those explanations have been recorded in Scripture. Amy Jill Levine in her book "Short Stories by Jesus" observed that "most of the parables are open narratives in order to invite us into engagement with them. Each reader will hear a distinct message and may find that the same parable leaves multiple impressions over time."

I find that most of the parables seem to have a well-known "moral of the story" and often our engagement stops there. We are tempted to see the parable as an allegory where each element of the parable "stands for" something related to the Kingdom. And, sometimes that is the case. But not always. So, when I reflect on a parable, one of my favorite things to do is to see if there is another way to think about it. It is rather like looking at the loveliness in a kaleidoscope and then turning the end of it a notch and we see something quite different.

So, let's turn to this little story about a fig tree. So, first hear this – this parable is not an allegory. The various persons and objects in the parable do not symbolize other things. It is tempting and, frankly, simplistic and wrong to think of the vineyard owner as being God and the gardener as being Jesus, and that poor fig tree being each of us as we live a life trying very hard to produce fruit – enough fruit to earn God's love and not be chopped down. The moral of this story is NOT that God is a scrutinizing landowner going across his vast lands inspecting all that belongs to him and then axing that which doesn't meet his expectations.

Let's turn the kaleidoscope a notch. Instead of focusing on the fig tree, let's focus on the gardener. The gardener knows that which is in his charge. He knows this fig tree. He knows that it hasn't produced for three years. He knows that it is taking up valuable land and using important resources. He knows this. And rather than cutting his losses and moving on, the gardener does something amazingly wonderful – he re-doubles his efforts in caring for the fig tree. Let me cultivate it, fertilize it, care for it and let's see what happens next year. Give me another year with it.

A year – a year of the Lord’s favor – as Jesus proclaimed in his first sermon in the synagogue: the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

After three years of frustration and waiting going without fruit, the gardener says, “Let me work even harder for this fig tree and we’ll see the fruit that it will bear!”

My friends, look at the fruit that we are bearing here in Lakeland and beyond. Even in the midst of pandemic.

Perhaps eighteen months ago we started Facebook Live and then these were made available through our website. And we started pre-recording special services and then we got updated equipment and now we’re live streaming and worshipping in person. We learned how to Zoom and make better use of email and even US Mail. And through these months of pandemic, we continued as the Body of Christ. To God be the glory – Please join me – **To God be the Glory!**

Over these months we partnered with community agencies and carloads of things were collected and packaged and bundled and delivered to agencies who received of your generosity with open arms, marveling at the volume of these gifts of Grace. To God be the Glory. **To God be the Glory!**

And, the quilters, even though they couldn’t gather together, they continued their cutting and piecing and stitching and tens upon tens, over a hundred quilts were completed and packaged and sent to grateful recipients – those who would experience the warmth and comfort they offered. To God be the Glory. **To God be the Glory!**

And the hungry in our community were fed – clients of Viste and Talbot House, students and their families of Oscar J Pope Elementary School. Food was collected for people locally and also those internationally through ELCA Global Hunger. People were fed. To God be the Glory. **To God the Glory!**

Dollars were collected for those suffering through disasters of all sorts – all to ease the pain of the losses they endured. To God be the glory! **To God be the glory!**

And in response to the needs of those fleeing desperate circumstances, immigrants -- more than 175 of them – received some of the basics in life – soap, a wash cloth, a comb and toothbrush. We set an initial goal and then received all that was needed to send over a 175 of the hygiene kits abroad to those in need. To God be the glory. **To God be the Glory!**

And my friends, that doesn’t even include the hymns that were sung, the prayers that were offered, the altars that were set, the choir rehearsed, and all the other details of the myriad of things that happened over the past eighteen months and longer. Not to mention the nonagenarian birthdays we have celebrated, as we do with Betty today. **To God be the glory!**

AND, this coming Saturday morning we are gathering together to look at where we have been, what these last months have held and, more importantly what the coming months and years may hold.

All of this fruit – because of the tender care of the gardener.

And I wonder what lies ahead – to what need of God’s people will we be asked to respond. What need of our community can we help meet. What wrong can we help right.

How might we proclaim:

- good news to the poor – to the families at Oscar J. Pope, the clients at the Talbot House, to the young ones at Anchor House.
- How might we proclaim liberty to the oppressed – those unable to feed their families because of poverty level minimum wage, the refugees fleeing their homelands seeking lands where they will be safe
- How might we proclaim recovery of sight to the blind – those who engage in hateful speech from which we need to shield our children, those who would deny basic health care to hundreds of thousands of our citizens, those who denigrate and stigmatize people of different religious faith
- How might we proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor – a favor that graces us day by day, favor that delights us with the beauty of creation at every turn, favor that comes to us in and through Jesus.

Jesus, who became one of us. Jesus who comes to us again in Word and Sacrament. Jesus who comes to us in the love and care we have for each other. Jesus who journeys to Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus, who cares for us as attentively as that gardener cared for the fig tree, calls the community of faith here at Grace to continue the year –the time – of the Lord’s favor.

Together: **To God be the glory!**