

Third Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "Jesus the Gardener: Fertilizer as Grace"
Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9
March 22-23, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Think of a time, maybe recently, when you were shocked by news that someone you knew had died out of the blue. A long illness, chronic disease, greatly advanced age **may** prepare a person, family and friends, for a death. But when a fatal accident, a murder, a catastrophic, unpredictable medical event happens, we're left speechless that the person with whom we may have just spent time is gone. Maybe we parted in person or on the phone saying, "See you soon!" or ended a text conversation with TTYL, "Talk To You Later," having no idea those words or that text were a final goodbye.

Those losses make us aware, for the umpteenth time, how **fragile** and how **finite** life is. The psalmist (Psalm 90:12) prays:

*Lord, teach us to number our days,
that we may live aright.*

*Teach us how short our life is,
so that we may become wise. (Good News)*

Wise enough to embrace this day, both its blessings and challenges, wise enough to drink in the beauty of this morning's sunrise and today's crop of daffodils, wise enough to give what I have that somebody else needs, wise enough to **stop** doing what hurts me or others, and **start** doing what makes for health, happiness, holiness, wise enough to know that when I hear God's voice, I should "harden not" my heart, but hearken to! The *Celebrate* intro to this weekend's lessons says: "The warnings are plentiful and blunt on the third Sunday in Lent. Cut it out or get cut down!"¹

Truth be told, I'm not lovin' this weekend's Gospel. It starts out dark and kind of confusing. People are bringing Jesus up-to-speed about the most recent outrage committed by Pilate. He had

his soldiers murder some Jews, apparently visitors from Galilee to Jerusalem, and then mix their blood with that of animals who had been ritually slaughtered for Temple sacrifices. Even secular history bears out that Pilate was a horrible man who did terrible things. Jesus assumes His hearers will conclude that the victims' murder must have been God's punishment for something awful they did, and same for the death of 18 others who were crushed when a tower collapsed. Jesus knew His fellow countrymen didn't really buy into coincidence: as in the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They believed ill fortune came from divinely directed punishment. Jesus tries to set them straight, saying two times that the victims weren't any worse than those who judged them, "... **but** *unless you repent, you will **all** perish just as they did.*" (Luke 13:3b, 5b)

Initially that confuses me because I'm thinking, "We're going to die anyway, regardless of whether we repent, so what does Jesus mean, '*unless you repent, you will **all** perish just as they did?*'" Scripture scholars tell us Jesus may have been predicting the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. But His listeners in the moment wouldn't have known that. So then I remember "the second death" that St. Francis of Assisi mentions in his Canticum of the Sun:

Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for **the second death** shall do them no harm.²

The "second death" is hell, the anguish of the ultimate loneliness, separation from God for all eternity. Jesus refers to this as being "*cast out into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" (Matthew 25:30): definitely where we **do not** want to be.

So Jesus says, "You all have to die, but you **don't** all have to perish: repent! Turn **from** what deals death **toward** what generates life." Most of us don't need somebody else to tell us where

we're falling short of the two greatest commandments, loving God above all else and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Sometimes we **do** need insight, but often what we need is **grace** to use that insight to change our course, **grace**, God's empowering love that comes to us as gift, not reward. God isn't dwelling on who we were or what we did yesterday; God is looking at who we are and what we're doing today. Ours is a God of justice **and** mercy; the parable in today's Gospel shows this mercy as **time**. The owner of the failing fig tree tells his gardener to chop it down because it's taking up valuable space, not having produced even one fig in three years. But instead of saying, "Yes, sir!" and getting out the hatchet, the wise gardener who loves the fig tree despite the fact that it's not bearing fruit, counters that he'd like to give the tree some TLC, cultivate the soil around its roots, spread fertilizer around the base, to give it a boost. I like this guy. I like him better than the practical owner of the vineyard, who's looking to maximize profits. But isn't the owner supposed to be **God**?? If that's so and I dislike the owner, might a tower fall on **me**??

I can't tell you how relieved I was to read an interpretation that says we should focus on the **gardener** being **Jesus**! In this case, God is the patient, nurturing gardener in this story, offering the **merciful** gift of **time** for us to get our act together. This makes sense to me because the **Gospel**, which literally means the Good News, can never be a counsel of **despair**!

The detail in the parable about piling on the manure has never excited me before, but I think the Holy Spirit has given me a new appreciation of it this year. When we find ourselves standing in the manure of life, we're naturally disgusted and disheartened by it. But what if that manure, that distressing life situation, can become the Miracle-Gro of our souls? What if it's our wake-up call that **we need God**? What if the catastrophe, whether it's relational, financial, medical, emotional or spiritual, makes it pretty clear that our options are either to despair and give up **or** to trust God and live in hope, trusting, hoping, surrendering more whole-heartedly than

we ever have before?? I found an old *Celebrate* insert reflecting on this Gospel that said, “... **the key to our peace is using the present moment to throw ourselves upon God’s grace.**”

Present moments that are peachy-keen, everything-coming-up-roses, may not compel us to throw ourselves upon God’s grace, but present moments that sink us in manure sure may.

Where there is life there is hope and where there is faith, hope and love there is God, and with God all things are possible. As a foretaste of Easter in this middle of Lent, I’ll close with this 12th century reflection about **Jesus the gardener**:

*O Lord Jesus, true gardener, work in us what you want of us, for without you we can do nothing. For you are indeed the true gardener, at once the maker and tiller and keeper of your garden, you who plant with the word, water with the Spirit and give increase with your power. You were mistaken, Mary, in taking him for the gardener of that mean little garden in which he was buried: he is the gardener of the whole world and of heaven, the gardener of the Church he plants and waters here below until, its harvest yielded, he will transplant it into the land of the living by the streams of living water, where it will fear no more the summer heat, where its leaves will be forever green and it will never cease from bearing fruit. Blessed are they who dwell in your heavenly gardens, Lord, through endless ages will they sing your praise.
Amen³*

¹*Celebrate*, 3rd Sunday in Lent, Year C (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2024).

²franciscanfriarscresson.org/the-canticle-of-the-sun.

³Guerric of Igny, found in Kerry Walters, *Growing God, A Guide for Spiritual Gardeners* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001).

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