

You are Still Worthy

Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry
King of Glory Lutheran Church
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Sanctified Art: Full to the Brim: Third Sunday in Lent: Luke 13:1-9

¹ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.² [Jesus] asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ 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?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

May God's grace allow our faith to be even more expansive. It is God alone who makes us worthy.

In the Netflix series *Maid*; a young single mother is trying to build a new life with her young child. (<https://www.netflix.com/title/81166770>) Season 1, Episode 9 “Blue Sky” includes a scene when the mother, “Alex,” has landed back at a domestic violence shelter. The host of the shelter takes Alex “shopping,” bringing her to the shelter’s boutique filled with gently-used, second-hand clothing. She hands her a shopping basket and invites her to “shop” for any clothes she wants and needs. Alex soon learns that the shopping tags and even the cash register are all props to create a feeling of normalcy, as everything in the boutique is free. This poignant scene captures Alex’s shock, dismay, and discomfort in being given a gift she doesn’t “earn” through monetary or commercial standards. That brothers and sisters in Christ, is called grace. This young mother is worth much more than the second hand clothing she gets for free. Grace.

Our gospel text for today includes 2 parables. First, we hear two stories of human suffering. Accounts of Pilate’s state sanctioned terrorism were well documented. Sin and evil were a part of our world thousands of years ago. On the other hand, accidental suffering was also a part of God's created world. It is very curious that

Jesus response to these two scenarios is about repentance. We'll return to that momentarily.

But then we have Jesus telling of a fig tree planted in the middle of a vineyard. An oddity perhaps. The owner clearly wants everything in his vineyard to bring a nice profit margin. So, like any good businessman he's taking a look over his field and notices a fig tree that isn't producing figs. His language is striking. The tree is "wasting the soil." We don't know how he talks about the other vines and grapes growing in his vineyard. A quick Google search will tell you that it can take a full three years from the first planting of a vine until the first harvest of grapes. But his frustration is palpable. This fig tree isn't up to snuff. Every inch of soil should produce something he can put in the bank.

We live in a culture that understands commodities, profit margins, and worth based on productivity, success, and status. If that stock isn't making us money, we find a new one. If the boss doesn't like how you are contributing the team, it gets noted in your annual review. There is always someone else to replace us. Why is it culturally acceptable to put seniors in nursing homes and then pretend they have no value anymore? Other cultures live with several generations under one roof. Heaven forbid, that we treat even one human being as a waste. God created each of us as worthy to take up space on this earth.

Jesus is commonly understood as the gardener in this parable. He advocates for this slow producing fig tree. "Leave it alone for one more year! I'm going to put some of my best manure on it. I'll watch it. I'll water it. I'll get my cultivating tools and make sure that the soil gets air and space! Give it another chance!"

I was told this week that when the new apple trees were planted in our King of Glory garden, they didn't produce fruit for three years. Sometimes what's happening underneath the soil is more important than what we see above the soil. Isn't that true of our spirits as well? God knows that. God understands what we need.

And so, Jesus figuratively as the gardener, gives this tree another chance. If I could fast forward the story ahead one year, I'm going to guess that the gardener will still be advocating for the tree. Because isn't that what our God does? God offers us forgiveness and grace not only a second time but a 22nd time and a 44th time and more after that! God is always rooting for us! Pun absolutely intended.

Take a look at this incredible illustration. God's hands are gently massaging the soil. God's arms are depicted with everything the tree needs. Sunlight. Rain. Space for root development. Nutrients.

There are many countries where an afternoon siesta happens every day. In the hot summer months, it gets people out of the heat. But it also allows for a nap, renewal and rest, or to spend time with family. I don't know about you but when I was in kindergarten we always had nap time after lunch. I have it on good authority from a kindergarten teacher that that doesn't happen anymore. Why not? Do we even our five year olds have to be learning every moment of every day? Why are adults looked down upon or even worse - pitied - when they cannot produce as fast as everyone else?

What if you and I are the fig tree? It's been a tough patch. We haven't produced fruit for three years. And yet God still advocates for us. God offers us unearned grace. God fulfills God's baptismal promise; that we are loved and have worth whether we produce or not. You and I could sit on a log and do nothing for the rest of our lives. God would still love us! That is the beauty of our Lutheran theology! We are created in God's image! It is God who does all the work to make us worthy. We do nothing except rest and be renewed by Amazing Grace.

How many of us heard bad theology when we were young? That only if we were perfect... the perfect mom, the perfect son, the perfect employee... Then we could earn God's love. Or we heard that only if we changed would God love us. Richard Rohr states the very opposite. God loves us so that we can change. But even when we don't? Grace. Unearned. Unmerited.

An old man walked a mile or two every morning to get water. He had two clay pots hanging from an oxen yoke over his shoulders. He filled them both with fresh water. Every day by the time he got home one clay pot was still full of water. The other clay pot was empty. Because it had several small cracks. Finally one day the cracked pot could stand it no longer. It cried out to its owner, "I don't understand why you take me every day to fill me with water? By the time we get home I am completely empty. I am useless. I am a waste of a pot! I am not perfect. I do nothing good for you. Why do you keep me around?"

The owner carried the cracked pot back outside. "Look at the path that you and I walk every day," he said. "Don't you see the flowers on your side of the path? Every day as I walk home, your cracks water these lovely wildflowers. You think you are useless. But you create wonderful beauty that I enjoy every day."

Isaiah 45 verse 9: Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter!

Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making”? or “Your work has no handles”?

Jesus stresses in the first parable, the importance of repentance. Remember that repentance means, with God's help, we stop a behavior and we turn in the other direction. Living, breathing, and basking in God's illogical and unconditional grace, will you pray with me?

* God we repent of those times that we have treated any other human being as a waste of time, or energy, or attention. They are made in your image.

* God we repent of our own feelings of unworthiness. May we remember that we are made in your incredible image.

* God we repent of not trusting in your opinion of us. We are not perfect and you made us exactly this way. Help us to receive your grace.

* God we repent how quickly and easily we buy into culture of productivity. May we know that in you alone, we have our worth. No matter our age or ability.

* God we repent of working so hard to make you and others love us. Give us the ability to live as if...you are constantly making us more like you.

Here's to the good news of a fig tree who didn't produce! Amen!