

For the people of St. Philip's  
Lent 3 Year C  
March 11, 2007  
Luke 13:1-9  
Maria Hoecker, preacher

Have you ever had a favorite tree?  
Like an apple tree that produces the best apples ever?  
Or a shade tree that really provides shade on a hot sunny day?  
Or maybe it is some of those flowering plum trees that are coming out right now with their pink blossoms in the spring.

Last year I was walking out in a meadow south of town and witnessed an amazing sight. A large old flowering cherry tree was in full bloom. No leaves yet, just pink blossoms and bare branches. I stopped to look at it around noon time. The bright sun was directly overhead and it caused the shadow of the branches overhead to be cast directly below in a circle around the tree. As I stood there and looked at the ground around the tree it seemed that the shadows on the ground of the overhanging branches had become the dark roots of the tree. I don't know if you can imagine this, but it seemed as though the entire tree was lit from above the ground and also from below the ground. Dark branches etched the blue sky above the tree and the dark shadows of each branch etched the grass below. It was an amazing sight. It was as though I could see the entire tree, from roots to trunk to branches. all lit from above and below the ground. I was aware that this vision of the tree was only possible for a few minutes in the bright noon day sun. Keep that image. A tree in its entirety, seen and unseen. I'll get back to it.

A few weeks ago I talked of birds, this week it's trees. People in Biblical times loved trees. Fig trees could grow tall and leafy and become shade trees too. People could get out of the hot sun and rest and relax in the shade of their fig tree.

In Biblical times, the Israelites not only loved fig trees because of the shade, they also loved figs. Figs, like grapes and pomegranates, were delicious, delectable, delightful and mouth watering to the taste. Imagine sitting in the dense shade and eating a juicy fig. Heaven.

This leads to our gospel story for today.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was traveling from Galilee up north to Jerusalem down south. It was an eighty mile journey.

While on that journey to Jerusalem, some unnamed people came up to Jesus and told them about two nasty disasters which apparently had recently occurred.

The first disaster: Pontius Pilate had been ruling Israel for four years and was a viscosly cruel ruler. Word was out that Pontius Pilate had mixed the blood of Galileans that he had executed with the blood of their Jewish sacrifices. This was about as appalling as it gets, for Pilate to have mixed human blood with the animal blood of sacrifices.

In essence, Jesus said this to them: "I know that some of you are thinking that these Galileans were killed and then their blood mixed with the blood of sacrifices because they were worse sinners than others. I want it to be clear to you, that is not true. Just because people suffer a nasty, horrible death, does not mean that they are bigger sinners than everybody else. That is just NOT true."

Rather, when someone dies so suddenly and abruptly, it is time for you to think about your own lives and how you are living. That terrible tragedy is an occasion for you to come to grips with your own eventual death. How are you with God? Are you ready to die?

Jesus tells the crowd. “While there is time, you need to repent, turn your lives around, and come back to the Lord. Otherwise, you *will* die, eternally. There is still time for you to change your ways.”

Jesus continued. Reminding the crowd of the tragic news of eighteen people being killed when a tower fell over near Siloam, just south of Jerusalem. That was a disaster. Jesus asks. Were those who died worse sinners than the rest of the residents of that town? No, of course not. Those eighteen died unexpectedly. Jesus is sort of reminding the crowds. You will die too. Are you ready for that? Unless you repent, you’ll die for all eternity.

Jesus then tells them a parable. Jesus does that. He often follows up his teaching with a parable. Parables make no sense at the surface, but as you go deeper into the play on words and images, the simple story begins to make a lot of sense to those who can hear the deeper meaning of the words.

Now keep in mind that the fig tree in our Gospel reading today most probably was Jesus’ way of cleverly describing the Jewish religious leadership. These religious leaders talked a good religious talk and used all the right “buzz words” and clichés but did not put their words into actions in their daily lives. The fig tree in the Gospel reading today symbolized the Pharisees who appeared healthy, they produced plenty of shadiness, but they produced no fruit of love.

They talked the talk but did not walk the walk. We all know folks like that. Sometimes we *are* those folk.

The tree looks healthy but it is not. A religious life can look healthy when it is not. A Christian can use all the right buzz words, read the Bible, attend church and do all the churchy things but still live a lie and not demonstrate the love of Christ in their daily actions. Perhaps they have showy foliage and no roots.... They are only half of what they seem to be.

Jesus said, "A man planted a fig tree in his garden. The man came looking for fruit from that fig tree. For three years, he came looking for fruit from that fig tree. He finally became frustrated with that fig tree and said to his gardener in frustration, “I have been coming here for three years and that tree does not produce any figs. Cut the thing down.” (Jesus had been dealing with these Pharisees for about three years.)

The gardener replied, “No, sir, give it another year to produce figs. Some more time. Let me dig around the roots and put good manure on it. If after a year, it still does not produce figs, then let’s cut it down.”

Think how the peasants from the country must have laughed to hear Jesus say that a little bit of manure shoveled around the roots of the Pharisees might produce some fruit.

We can laugh too. It’s funny. Jesus was telling a good story. But what does this gospel mean for us today?

We all know that an unproductive fruit tree is a waste of time, space and energy.

But the gardener reasons, “WAit a minute.. Let’s give this tree one more chance. One more year. New manure. Good water. Let’s give this tree one more chance to deepen its roots.”

That is what we hear from Jesus today. God wants to give us another chance, another season to live our lives in ways that God expects. But we are reminded, we don’t know how long we have left to change our ways. Now is the time to bear fruit.

The Lord God created fruit trees, and expects those trees to produce fruit.

God created you and me to be loving people, and expects us to live lives of love for God and our neighbors.

It is that simple.

God gives us each of our days.....to live as though it’s our last day on earth.

Sometimes it seems to me as though I have been drifting along in life, not doing much with the life that the Lord God has given me. Do you ever feel that way? Has your life at some point has been like a fruitless fig tree? providing shade for people around you, pleasant enough, but not fully realized in purpose? I've had some of those shady times in my life....

That's ok. That is a secondary purpose for you, to provide shade for your family and friends.

But the Lord God created us for another purpose, a *primary* purpose, which is to produce fruit, to produce the fruit of love. God creates us primarily to love God and our neighbor with all our heart, mind, and soul.

There's still time, one more day or so.. maybe more, we don't know. Every day God is giving us another chance to live the way God wants us to. It's such a simple charge. Love God. Go ahead, love your neighbor as you would love yourself.

The fruit of a tree is a symbol of that love. In this season all around us we see the beginnings of fruit. As we watch for those singing birds, we can also see the cherry and apple blossoms taking shape on the trees which surround us. Each year, fruit grows because it is attached to a branch of a living tree. We are a part of that living tree, that's God's promise to us.

You and I are attached to Jesus and his love. God's love courses within us and through us. We are a part of that living tree. Amen.