

# "Lenten Fruit"

Luke 13:6-9

March 11,2007

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

A man was driving along a country road on a beautiful fall day when he came upon a huge apple orchard. There were hundreds and hundreds of apple trees as far as he could see. Thinking he might be able to get some fresh juicy apples, he pulled over and knocked at the door of the farm house near the orchard. When the farmer answered, the man asked, "Can I buy some fresh apples from your trees?" "Nope", replied the farmer. "Why not?", asked the man. The farmer said, "Because I don't have any apples." "You don't have any apples?", the man said. "But I see hundreds and hundreds of apple trees out there. What about them?" "They don't have any apples, either," the farmer replied. "No apples?", " the man said. "Then why do you even have an apple orchard?" The farmer replied, "Because I like pretty trees."

This is either the dumbest farmer in the history of the world or an obviously made up story to illustrate a point. Let's go with the second option. And what is the point? The point is that no one keeps an apple orchard because the trees are pretty. There's only one reason to have an apple tree and an apple orchard: the apples.

Now, a farmer doesn't expect apples or apple trees to appear out of nowhere. He will go and pay the price to purchase the saplings for the orchard.

Even after he has purchased them, the farmer doesn't just put the saplings up against the side of his house and expect them to grow apples. No, the farmer will take the trees and plant them in fertile soil so that they can grow big and strong and become capable of producing apples. He'll work the ground, providing moisture, fertilizer, and anything else that is needed to nurture the trees as they grow.

When fall comes, the farmer will then expect to find apples on the trees. He's not interested in just pretty looking trees. It is the crop he is interested in. If there are no apples, that means there is something wrong. A farmer might patiently work with a tree that has no apples. But, if there is no

change, that tree will ultimately be uprooted and burned in order to make room for a tree that will produce fruit.

It was this simple agricultural scenario that was the background for Jesus' parable in our Gospel reading today. Only instead of apples, He talked about a fig tree which a man had planted and from which he expected fruit. The man in the story represents God and the fruit represents that which God expects from people.

The parable is not addressed to people in general, but to God's people in particular. The fig tree represented the nation of Israel. God had chosen Israel to be His people. He had redeemed them out of slavery in Egypt so they might be his own.

God did not simply purchase them and then leave them on their own. He planted them in the a land He had promised to their forefathers. He continually nurtured them with His love through His Word spoken to them by Moses, the judges, and the prophets.

Like a man who had planted a fig tree and then expected figs, God expected "fruit" from His people whom He had planted and nurtured. He wanted them to live lives of repentance in which they turned from sin and turned toward lives of holiness.

But, as Jesus implies in His parable, God found no fruit. The people of Israel were content to be "pretty looking trees". They had all the outward trappings of the people of God – the Temple, the sacrificial system, and so on – and they looked like the people of God. But they took advantage of God's grace. They did not repent of their sin, but they continued in their sin, figuring they were exempt from judgment because they were the Chosen People.

Like the man in the parable who was ready to cut the tree down and throw it out, God was ready to cut off Israel and destroy it. But, in the parable, the man who cares for the vine (whom many people take to represent Jesus) pleads for the tree. He asks for another year in which he would nurture and care for it. If it then bears fruit, fine. If not, then he agrees that it should be cut down. Thus, the people of Israel were given time to repent and bear fruit during the time of Jesus' ministry among them. If they would bear fruit, fine. If not, then they would be cut off. And we know what

happened to them: they chose not to bear fruit. Therefore, the Temple was burned, the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people were scattered among the nations of the world.

This parable is told also as a warning to us in modern day America about what God expects of us. And, yes, God does expect certain things of us. We have done so much to turn God into a Heavenly Genie who exists to do our bidding or a Spiritual Grandfather who pats us on the head and tells us that we are okay that we find it hard to believe that God actually expects certain things from us.

Now, remember that Jesus is not speaking to people in general in this parable. He is not telling people how to produce fruit so that they may go to heaven. He is talking to people who are going to heaven about producing fruit along the way. God has already chosen you in your baptism. He has paid the price for your sin with the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, shed on the cross so that you might belong to Him and live with Him forever in heaven. To speak in the terms of the parable, you are His tree. You belong to Him.

He has not left you alone, expecting you to bear fruit. He has planted you in the vineyard of His Church with all of His other trees. He has nurtured the new life within you by means of His Holy Word and through the power of His Sacraments. He makes you spiritually whole and healthy. He gives you His Spirit and His power.

And now, like the fig tree farmer in the parable, God expects fruit from you. He expects you to repent – to turn from sin, as it's defined by the Law of God, not as we or society might define it. He expects you to lead a changed life – a life which is improving in obedience to God and in service of God. Martin Luther put it this way: "This is what true repentance means. Here a person needs to hear something like this, 'You are all of no account, whether you are obvious sinners or saints in your own opinion. You have to become different from what you are now. You have to act differently than you are now acting, whether you are as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you can be. Here no one is godly.'" (Smalcald Articles III III 3-6) In other words, repentance is more than words. It is action. And it is for everyone – not just "obvious sinners."

What is God finding in your life? Many are content to be just a pretty looking tree, that is, one who is content to have only the outward trappings of God – confirmation, church membership, and a religious accent to one's life

Many take the grace of God for granted. We use God's grace as an excuse for our sinful lives. After all, we are all poor miserable sinners who are saved by grace and not by works. We use God's grace as a license to sin. Since God will forgive all our sins, it really doesn't matter what we do. When pastors try to preach against specific sins (rather than sin in general) and to preach about sanctified living, many are upset by it and accuse him of being "legalistic" or "judgmental" so that they don't have to pay attention to it.

God is ready to cut off those who do not bear fruit, regardless of whatever reason or excuse they might have. Yet, for the sake of Jesus, He gives us all a time to change and bear fruit. From the time of Jesus' ascension to the time of His return in glory, the people of God have the opportunity to bear fruit before He cuts off all which do not bear fruit.

The key to bearing fruit is not difficult. You do not need to be a Biblical scholar in terms of knowledge or Mother Theresa in terms of action. Jesus says, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (John 15:4) Remain in Jesus where His Word is spoken and where His body and blood are given – in the Divine Service here in His house. Take that Word from here into your homes for private and family use. This is not just a religious exercise, but this is how you are nurtured to produce the fruit which God requires. Jesus promises, "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Then, by God's grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit, produce that fruit. Make choices in your priorities and in your actions that are in accord with the will of God instead of on the basis of what society or your sinful nature tell you. Do not take God's grace for granted or as a license to sin. Rather, having been forgiven of all sin and released from the judgment due your sin because of Jesus' death on the cross, see the freedom you have to obey God out of love for Him and

to please Him, instead of out of fear of punishment by Him and to placate Him. When you do sin (and you will), don't make excuses, accept it or ignore it, but repent immediately and receive God's free forgiveness and immediate restoration for Jesus' sake.

Lent is a good time for each of us to consider important questions about repentance and fruit bearing. When God comes seeking fruit in our congregation, what will He find? Will He find pretty looking but barren trees which need to be cut down and burned? Or, will He find trees laden with the fruit of worship, the fruit of obedience, and the fruit of service which will flourish in His heavenly vineyard? God grant that He may always find the latter and not the former. Amen.