

3rd Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, IA
Rev. Amy Larson
[click here to read scripture passages for the day](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

If the fig tree in this story could talk, I'm guessing it would sound a lot like we often sound.

"One more year. That's all I need. Last year was a crazy year but just one more year and I'll be able to get it together.

One more year, one more month, one more day, just a little more time is all I need.

Just a little more time and I'll have something to show for myself,

just a little more time and I'll have done more,

just a little more time and I'll bear fruit.

I'll get my life organized, I'll give more, I'll serve more. I just need more time."

We especially feel this way when we're reminded that our time is short, in the face of tragedies like those that Jesus was talking about with his disciples - towers falling, people dying at the hands of the ruthless.

In the face of things like that, when we hear about the mass shootings, terrorist attacks and natural disasters that happen all too often in our day, we feel the need to make our lives count, to make a difference, to bear good fruit.

That's a good impulse but what do we do with it?

Just try harder right? That's the answer.

Just try harder and work harder and make more lists and get more efficient and then we'll bear more fruit.

Try a new strategy we see online, buy a book, go to a workshop.

This is a common approach in American culture, one we often turn to at the New Year, and maybe again when Lent comes around and we feel like we have a second chance on New Year's Resolutions.

The self-help industry rakes in billions on our attempts to try harder to do good and be good.

Certainly there are strategies and techniques we can learn that can help us with many things but ultimately self-help tools can feed our American idolatry- our American obsession with our own work and trust in our own effort.

When we put our focus on ourselves and what we're doing, we don't end up bearing good fruit.

Instead, we produce a number of thorns.

One thorn that often arises is pride as we congratulate ourselves for the good we've done, the ways we've been kind, the people we've helped.

We get to thinking that we are God's great gift to the world and that we really know what the world needs.

We get illusions that we are in control and that we should be in control.

Another thorn, closely related to pride, is judgment.

We critique people who don't seem to be working as hard or achieving as much as we are.

We start to think others must deserve whatever doesn't go well for them, the way the people around Jesus wanted to judge those who had been killed by Pilate and falling towers.

Yet another thorn is discouragement.

When our focus is on our own effort, we can despair when we're not progressing as we'd hoped.

And things never progress as we hope in our American, linear understanding of progress, onward and upward.

Bearing fruit happens in a seasonal cycle of death and rebirth.

Thankfully when Jesus calls us to repent, he isn't saying try harder.

He isn't saying just redouble your efforts.

He is saying repent, return to God, for you have no hope of thriving apart from the gifts and care of God.

The example Jesus uses, the example of the fig tree, helps to flesh this out.

Fig trees are created to bear fruit; it's what fig trees are supposed to do.

And yet fig trees don't produce good fruit just because of their own effort.

Fig trees need to be planted in the right soil and the soil needs to be tended.

They need the right amount of nourishment, sun and rain, all things that come from outside of the tree.

And if a fig tree doesn't bear good fruit, it can't just make up its mind to start cranking out figs. It can't just decide to try really hard to turn over a new leaf. A tree can't fix itself.

If anything is going to change, it's going to have to start outside the tree with the care and tending of a gardener.

The tree needs a gardener, a gardener who is committed to its care, a gardener who is willing to get down in the muck, willing to get dirty.

And the fig tree needs to give itself over entirely to the care of the gardener.

It needs to let go of any fig tree notions of being in charge of its fig tree fate.

All this is true for us.

Like the fig tree we were created to bear fruit, to offer good and beautiful gifts that nourish God's creation.

Like the tree we too are dependent.

We are dependent on God who created us and who planted us in love.

We need God who sends us sunshine and rain, who nourishes us with bread and wine and milk that we did not earn but that is given freely as we heard in the reading from the prophet Isaiah today.

With those gifts we can do what we are created to do and bear good fruit.

And yet, even with all those good gifts we still don't bear good fruit. Our pride and judgment and despair grow and choke out the fruit that would come.

We deserve to be cut down.

But we have a gardener, Jesus, who works to bring us forgiveness, to give us second chances.

Jesus commits to tending us, to get down in the dirt and the muck for us.

In Jesus and his care is our hope.

Jesus works to set us free from all the sin that chokes us so that we can bear the fruit, do the good, we are intended to do.

We need to give ourselves entirely over to the care of this gardener, and let go of our attempts to try harder, to be in charge, to fix ourselves.

In the care of the gardener, we are freed to be who we were created to be, nothing more, nothing less.

As we gather for worship, as we confess and receive forgiveness, as we are convicted and set free through the power of scripture, as we come to the table to taste forgiveness and mercy, Jesus the gardener works the soil of our lives so that we might bear fruit.

Just one more year, just one more day, just a little more time - none of us know how much time we do have here on earth but let's receive the time we do have as one of the many gifts of God.

Let's receive all that we are given each new day and give ourselves entirely into the care of our good and faithful gardener so that we might bear fruit.