

Third Sunday in Lent  
Exod. 3:1-15; 1 Cor. 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

## Spiritual Fruit\*

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I recently came across a book called *Foods Jesus Ate and How to Grow Them*. Although the title sounds a bit odd, the book was actually quite interesting. The book talked about gardening as a spiritual practice, and it gave lots of tips on how to grow the kinds of vegetables, herbs, and fruits that flourished in biblical times. The book even included recipes like lentil salad and fig raisin cakes! (Something to think about for coffee hour.)

I realized, in reading the book, that horticulture – or the science of caring for plants – can actually be an important resource for interpreting and understanding the Bible. If you think about it, the Bible is filled with references to plants. We hear, of course, about Moses' encounter with the burning bush in today's Hebrew Bible reading from Exodus. The Book of Psalms opens with a tree planted by streams of water. And Jesus' parables are filled with stories about sowing and reaping.

In fact, it can be said that the entire biblical narrative is framed by plants. The Bible begins with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Book of Genesis. It ends with the Tree of Life in the Book of Revelation. And right in the middle is the tree of Golgotha – the cross – from which Jesus was crucified.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells us the parable of the barren fig tree. A landowner planted a fig tree, but after three years the tree had not yet born fruit. The landowner orders the gardener to cut it down, since it is wasting valuable soil. The gardener asks the landowner to be patient. The gardener promises to dig around the tree and put fertilizer on it. If the tree still does not bear fruit in a year, then the landowner can cut it down.

Based upon my very limited studies in biblical horticulture 101, this parable is actually fairly accurate in terms of how to deal with plants that do not bear fruit. Three things are needed in such a situation.

First, it takes time. Although the average fig tree bears fruit after two years, sometimes it takes longer, depending upon the weather, soil conditions, pollination, and a host of other factors.

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Second, it takes care. You can't just plant a tree and expect it to flourish. You need to prune the branches so that there is room for the fruit to grow. (In fact, the Greek word for "gardener" in this parable – *ampelourgon* – actually means "vinedresser," which focuses on the task of pruning.) You also need to break up the soil and add nutrients such as compost or manure.

Third, it takes struggle. Sometimes you can actually take care of a tree too much. If you prune it too much or apply too much fertilizer, that will actually inhibit growth. As one gardening guide put it, "Let the tree struggle a bit, and it'll produce better fruit."

Now of course, Jesus is not just talking about literal fruit in this parable, but spiritual fruit. Some context may be helpful. Our Gospel passage begins with a discussion about two tragedies that had occurred in Jerusalem: first, the slaughter by Pontius Pilate of certain Galileans who had been protesting the Roman government's policies in the Temple; and second, the death of eighteen individuals who happened to be standing under a falling tower that was connected to the city walls.

As many of us do in the aftermath of a tragedy, the people talking with Jesus were trying to make sense of these disasters. Why did this happen, they asked. Was God punishing these people because they were greater sinners than those who had been spared? Did the victims deserve what happened to them? No, Jesus said. Don't worry about them. Focus on yourselves and your production of spiritual fruit. And so Jesus tells the people the parable of the barren fig tree.

Jesus' parable is particularly appropriate during this season of Lent, when we are called to reflect upon our own lives and our own production of spiritual fruit. Like the fig tree, we also need time, care, and struggle in order to bear spiritual fruit.

First, time. Spiritual growth doesn't just happen overnight. That's why Lent is a period of forty days, and not forty hours. And that's why growing into the likeness of God – *theosis* or sanctification – is a lifelong process. Like the landowner in the parable, we must be patient – not just with others, but also with ourselves.

Second, care. Spiritual growth requires us to pay attention to ourselves. Like the gardener in the parable, we need to prune ourselves of the bad habits that may be blocking the development of new spiritual shoots. We also need to ensure that the soil of our lives are conducive to growth, fertilizing it with the practice of prayer and the reading of scripture.

Third, struggle. Sometimes the greatest spiritual growth happens during difficult times – times of desolation, as Ignatius of Loyola reminds us. A faith that is tested grows deeper roots and comes out even stronger. To paraphrase the gardening guide: if we struggle a bit, we'll produce better fruit. Indeed, struggle can be a time for hope, and not just despair. As St. Paul reminds us in today's epistle reading from his first letter to the Corinthians, God will never let us be tested beyond our strength.

After solemn mass today, we will gather for a town hall meeting and embark upon the search for the eighth rector of the Church of the Transfiguration. I encourage us to keep in mind these three principles of spiritual growth in the coming months.

We will need time. At times, the search process may seem unduly complicated and drawn out. But truly good things don't happen overnight.

We will need care. The search process requires us to look at ourselves and to be honest about our strengths and challenges as a community. As such, it will be particularly important to nurture ourselves and to be kind to one another.

Finally, we will need struggle. The search process is never easy. There will be times of conflict and division. But struggle is never a cause for despair as long as it happens in the context of our love for God, and our love for each other.

Time. Care. Struggle. These are the three lessons that Jesus teaches us today about the barren fig tree. May we remember these lessons throughout this season of Lent. And may we remember these lessons as we grow as a parish community and seek to bear spiritual fruit for the church and for the world.