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Life Giving Manure
Luke 13:1-9, Romans 8:28, 31-38

***Luke 13:1-9:** At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”*

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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?’ ⁸The gardener replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

What a difference a week makes right now!

A week ago many were sharing jokes about the coronavirus, downplaying it’s seriousness and impact, even whether it was real. Now we know this is no joke.

In a week we went from under 2,000 people infected to almost 20,000 in this country. Major cities are locked down, even Tulsa and Owasso have businesses closed. New York seems to be the worst (which worries me with a brother and sister in NYC, and my sis an ER doctor), but the truth is Oklahoma has such a shortage of tests that we don’t know how many people are sick here.

One thing we are learning is that this crisis is not OVER THERE, or affecting just THEM.

It is affecting US.

All of us—and we are all in this together.

Not just our body of Christ, but the body of humanity.

We are in this with our brothers and sisters in humanity, all around the globe.

It is serious,
and yet there are some things we have to laugh about,
 like how to ration toilet paper....
 or how it feels to go to the store and find only raisin bread...
 or what it sounds like to be working from home with kids and animals in the
 background.
 We have to laugh about some of this.
 Because it is so serious.

This week I've talked to **many people struggling in our community.**
 People with health problems,
 people who have lost, or may lose a job,
 People who are just going a little crazy being isolated and alone at home,
 separated from dear friends and family.
 I miss seeing my Dad, who is very frail,
 and I know you are missing people too.

We are all struggling in one way or another, in big and small ways.
 And we are all being asked to make sacrifices,
 to protect those who are most vulnerable in our midst.

Jesus was talking to people who knew about hardship and pain in Luke 13.
 He begins the story by **reassuring his followers** that
bad things do happen to good people,
 and suffering is not a formula---
 where you do something bad, and something bad happens.
Bad things just happen.
 And yet—we still cry out to God when things happen, saying ‘Why me?’
 And ‘What did I do wrong?’

But the truth is what Jesus says--
It's a messy world out there.
 Human life is broken, because it's fallen...
 and it won't be perfect this side of heaven.

Jesus recounts some horrific stories.
 Some **Galileans** had been killed, and sacrificed by Pontius Pilate.
 Another group of people had been crushed when the **tower of Siloam** fell on them.
 Jesus assures his listeners that they were no worse sinners,
 they were not deserving of these tragedies.

Bad things happen to good people.

Then Jesus says, ***repent***—or you too will perish.
 Do you know what repent means? It means to turn in a different direction.
 It means to stop sinning, and ***turn around***.
 Jesus is saying—hey, we all need to be going in the right direction.

Then, after mentioning these tragedies,
Jesus tells this story about a barren fig tree.
 It's kind of like he's saying—
 I know you question the fairness of bad things happening to good people,
 but pay attention to this story.

Imagine you are a barren fig tree.
 The vineyard owner (the world) is frustrated,
 and wants to cut you down.
 But ***God the gardener, says give me some manure, and one more year,***
 and this tree will bear fruit.

Jesus goes from talking about what is fair, to what is ***beyond fair***.
 How often are we like the vineyard owner?
 We see something that seems beyond hope, and we just want it gone.
 It's dead, so just cut it down.

But ***God is the master gardener***, and God is beyond fair—
 in fact, God takes a look at the barren fig tree
 and has a plan to bring it back to life.
 God the gardener brings ***hope***.
 God says this just might be the year for this tree to ***bear fruit!***

With a ***little TLC, and a pile of manure*** of course.

I love that. Bring on the manure.
 Life-giving manure.
 There's definitely ***no shortage of manure*** in life right now, is there?

I mean just think about it ***in your life*** right now—
 where is your hardship? suffering? The pain in your life?
 For many of us, it is the isolation, right?

That, on top of dwindling finances, job uncertainty, kids at home, working from home, separation from loved ones,
on top of our usual struggles--of bodies, hearts, and minds!
It's enough to make us feel *a little lost*.

Lent is a 40 day wilderness time—
like Jesus' 40 days in the desert,
and the Israelites wandering through the wilderness for 40 years,
on their way to the Promised Land.

In a way we are in a wilderness time—all of us—together
during this coronavirus pandemic.
We are all struggling with, well, let's admit it—
we are struggling with some manure.
Some fertilizer if you will.

Eugene Peterson, the Presbyterian Pastor who wrote *The Message Bible*
says this about the manure in his book, *Tell It Slant*:
*Manure does not rank high in the world's economies. It is refuse. **Garbage.***
We organize efficient and sometimes elaborate systems to collect it, haul it away,
get it out of sight and smell. But the observant and wise know that this apparently
dead and despised waste is teeming with life—enzymes, numerous microorganisms.
*It's the stuff of **resurrection**.* Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant* (Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 69–70

That's some *powerful language about refuse*.
Manure is the *stuff of resurrection*?
Well, what if it is?

I have been Zoom video-conferencing with dozens of people,
including fellow pastors.
And we've talked about how we may have to record or live stream a worship service
for Holy Week, and Easter---
but when we are back together again in church, all together,
we will have the *biggest resurrection party* you've ever seen! No matter what time
of year it is!

Right now,
we are surrounded by fear and loss of life.
We are surrounded by situations that seem like garbage, junk, manure.
But God can use it—all of it—and bring something good!

My favorite devotional, *Streams in the Desert*, is constantly talking about how life is found in the midst of pain. The life that is found in, well, the manure.

Many *Psalms* of the Bible were written by people who were suffering and scared.

*In Psalm 46 it says: God is our refuge and strength,
a very present[a] help in times of trouble.*

*2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*

*3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

*7 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge...*

10 "Be still, and know that I am God!"

Aren't those words we all need to hear right now?

God is our refuge and strength!

We will not fear, though the earth should change!

We can be still, and know that God is God!

Many beautiful *hymns* were written by people who were suffering, in unspeakable ways. Horatio Spafford was a wealthy Chicago lawyer and devout Christian, with a thriving legal practice, a beautiful home, a wife, four daughters and a son.

At the very height of his financial and professional success, Horatio and his wife Anna lost their young son to scarlet fever. Shortly thereafter, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed all of his property.

Two years later, in 1873, Spafford scheduled a boat trip to Europe in order to give his wife and daughters a much-needed vacation and time away. Spafford sent his wife and daughters ahead of him while he remained in Chicago to take care of some unexpected last-minute business. Several days later he received notice that the ship had collided with another, and it sank. The telegram he received from his wife said only this: *Saved. Alone. What shall I do?* All four of his daughters had drowned; only his wife survived.

With a heavy heart, Spafford boarded a boat that would take him to his grieving Anna in England. It was on this trip, as they passed where the boat had gone down, that he penned a now famous hymn,

When sorrow like sea billows roll; it is well, it is well with my soul.

As we look around us—

we could spend time ***complaining*** about what seems to be wrong, unfair.

Our individual sorrows, our lack of resources,

The things we don't like.

Or—we could give thanks for what is well in our soul.

We could feel like the vineyard owner—and see this mess, and just, ***give up.***

Or, what if we ***paid attention to the gardener?***

Because God the gardener says---this is going to be the year,
the year for you to bear fruit.

Just give me a little time, and a pile of manure, and I'll bring this tree to life.

Is this ***your year?***

Is this the year that the places where we've felt dead will be ***resurrected?***

Is this the year for us, ***to bear fruit?***

Even in the midst of a pandemic?

Our General Presbyter Tim wrote in the Presbytery newsletter this week that he has ***never seen the church MORE connected than right now,***

as pastors and church members seek out new ways to stay connected,
to serve, and to love each other.

Is God taking all the bad, and bringing something good?

What if we can ***grow*** through this?

What if our ***walk with Jesus can be deeper and stronger?***

Are you willing ***to take a step of faith in that direction?***

Are you willing to see ***what is well..in the midst of so much that is bad?***

Each morning now I am journaling.

And it can start a bit heavy, reflecting on what is happening.

But then I find myself writing down a list...a very long and growing list...of ***blessings.***

Because, what if somehow, all this manure can be used to bring *new life*?
 All our trials and tribulations,
 they can be the stuff of resurrection!

I believe God *can and will, use everything*—even our suffering and shortcomings—
 to help us bear fruit...if only we'll surrender it!

It's like Paul said in **Romans 8:28**

I know that all things work together for the good, for those who love God...

He ***DID NOT say all things ARE good.***

He said God can use all things, and work them together, for good.

Manure can cause a tree to bear fruit!

All the dead junk....can lead to life!

That's the truth----Resurrection comes after death!

And Paul goes on in Romans today, to talk about the hope we have:

31 ... If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?....

37 ...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now if that's not the ***Good News of the Gospel today***, I don't know what is.
 And for that, all God's people say, Amen.