

Never Giving Up 3 Lent C

“He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year...'” Luke 13:8

The scriptures today captivate the imagination. The temptation for me would be to preach on the ‘holy ground’ that Moses walked and indeed the ground where we all walk.

That’s not what I sense we need to hear however. It is the parable of the gardener that I reflect on today. This past week I rode with one of Janesville’s finest police officers who had been working with a young lady that had attempted suicide a few weeks ago. We stopped to check on her. Her room was freshly painted thanks to the officer’s wife that bought a gallon of paint after visiting the young woman and asking for her choice in colors. The officer helped her get her GED paperwork and he asked if she had followed through and taken the test. “Not yet,” was the reply. He encouraged her. I listened. She was a different person from the one he found clinging to life, he told me later.

The gardener in our gospel defends the fig tree that is struggling to produce fruit. From appearances it should be destroyed. The gardener, who loves his land, employs patience with the tree. The owner of the vineyard is disappointed on the other hand. He expected that this fig tree would have grown something by now. Fig trees are hard to grow in any climate especially when they are young.

When I was a young Christian, an elderly member of my church got me interested in growing figs in my parents’ back yard. He gave me one of his saplings, taught me about its proper depth in the ground, the soil and how to prepare the small tree for winter. It had to be wrapped in burlap and a tin can was placed over the top to keep precipitation from going down the wrap and freezing the plant.

The first year the tree gave nothing. I was hopeful but I was told it would take another season. Sure enough the tree’s buds sprouted flowers and the flowers about a half dozen yummy figs. The next year I was even more hopeful. The winter however, was harsh and my preparations did not seem to help. No figs came; not even buds or flowers. The webs from spiders began to connect the top of the tree to the rest of the branches. The fig tree was in trouble. It finally got brittle and dry and I dug it up. And that was the end of my fig growing career!

In the gospel lesson, the gardener takes on the role of advocate. That seems pretty clear. He defends the tree from certain doom in the hands of the vineyard owner. The owner is not a bad guy here, not in any way. He wants the good soil to be used by a fig tree that will produce. Can we blame him? The gardener is a good guy as well. He knows his trees just like the kind man that taught me how to prepare my tree.

The parable is much deeper, if we look. Some plants that are surrounded by good soil, and are continually nurtured and "fed", grow strong and bear much fruit. Other plants that are planted in good soil when they are young, but never fed or nurtured again...eventually will weaken and stop bearing fruit. But if the plant that

is weak and struggling, is brought into the care of the gardener before it is too late...it may thrive once again.

Jesus is the gardener, who digs, refreshes the soil, waters and waits for our flowering and fruit to be born. Yet, we must yield to Christ and His work in us if we are to be fruitful. Some plants and trees need more work than others. I am one of those that need work. And yet, the God that calls Himself, I AM is with me. The good work that God began in me will continue. My part is to yield to His gardening and bear fruit.

Fruit and repentance have much in common. To bear fruit, change must occur. Something inside a person changes in order to have growth. We are speaking of Lent; the journey that leads to repentance, and the fruit that is produced by our repentance is a life giving change that is good for us and good for others. This season of Lent we are in, is a time for us to present that fruit as an offering of our lives to God.

The journey of Lent can be dirty work. Turning good character into good works is a sweaty job. After self examination, repentance and the other disciplines, we prepare ourselves during the season of Lent to bring forth the fruit of our labors. But we can't just feed the garden once a year. Our lives need to be continually fed with what is good and pure. We must be conscious of the "weeds" that are growing close, and remove them lest they choke the good that could be produced. Just as the gardener must be vigilant in his garden, so we should be careful where we put down our roots.

There is a mother in Brooklyn, NY who woke up to the "weeds" in her life and the lives of her four children. They were members of a gang called the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation. As her children became older, Mari started to reflect on her life of being subjected to beatings, shooting and slashing people, and being raped by Latin Kings, and then decided to flee the community. Now, the 38-year-old ex-gang member-turned-minister shakes her head at the day she joined the gang looking for family. She and her children are a part of a new family at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Brooklyn.

Mari has allowed the Gardener to change her life forever. And now she is bearing the fruits of that change. She is now feeding her children and others what they need to bear fruit as well. Mari told the reporter, *"I told them that they're no longer a part of it. I said, 'Remember what we've been through.'"*

<http://www.nydailynews.com/>. New York Daily News June 15, 2008

What fruit could we produce to the glory of God, if we were to yield our lives to the Gardener; what life giving skills could be shared with the world? It takes a life willing to let Jesus take a shovel to the ground, and allow Him to work the soil in our garden. With some good earth and a lot of patience, we can bring the love of Christ into our lives, and like the police officer, bring out the love for life in others. Though the world may never know or cheer us on; our good works may go unnoticed, but the God who sees, will send us to the people who need us. Or He may send a "gardener" to help us grow. Amen.