

## **By their fruits you shall know them.**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C. March 7, 2010. (Text: Luke 13:1-9)*

Most of Jesus' neighbors believed the Near Eastern folk wisdom that *bad things happen to bad people*. If somebody died because of an earthquake or was stricken with leprosy, there was bound to be a person nearby to remark, "See! He's a sinner. He's being punished by God."

Imagining other people's misfortunes as consequences of their moral failures wasn't just an ancient Near Eastern trait, as we all know. The habit lingers in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. (Just remember the blather from people like Pat Robertson when the Haiti earthquake happened.) And haven't you heard people say things like: "Most of those people in the shelters wouldn't be homeless if they had any gumption. They're just lazy and want other people to provide for them. They probably spend every penny they get on booze." That kind of thinking, aside from being both self-righteous and judgmental, illustrates a phenomenon we call "blaming the victim." —You hear it all the time.

But if something bad happens to *us* — if we get a scary diagnosis from the doctor or we wreck the car — don't we think, "*Why me? I don't deserve this!*" And we probably don't. (Of course, if you continue to smoke after being told it could cause lung cancer, or if you're texting on your iPhone while driving the car, you might anticipate some adverse consequences.)

We don't inhabit a simple "cause-and-effect" moral universe. The truth is that bad things happen to *good* people about as often as they do to *wicked* people. The innocent sometimes suffer. The guilty sometimes escape punishment. Honest, hard-working folks get laid off and can't find new jobs, while sleazy characters hustling questionable products seem to be finding new ways to make a buck, regardless of the recession. —And we sigh, "It's not fair!"

Our lives, our welfare, our health, our economic system —all of these depend on people and circumstances beyond our control. Philosophers say we live in a "contingent universe," and for there to be authentic freedom in the universe there needs to be as much liberty for evil as for good. (Now *there's* some food for thought. —But those thoughts will have to wait for a different sermon.)

Jesus disagreed with "*bad things only happen to bad people*" thinking. He said that the Galileans whom Pontius Pilate slaughtered in the Temple and the Jerusalemites who were walking by the tower at Siloam when it fell on them weren't any worse than other people. We're all sinners of one kind or another. Those people didn't meet their unhappy ends because they were more wicked than anyone else. God wasn't punishing them; they were just accident victims. "*BUT,*" Jesus said to the crowd of bystanders, "*If you don't repent, you'll perish too.*" —What did he mean by that?

I think he was saying that while misfortune and natural disaster are in the natural, random order of things in a "contingent universe" — and not instances of divine judgment — we still mustn't think that there will never be *any* consequences for our disobedience to God's will. Jesus said that God looks for *fruit* from our lives the way the gardener in his parable looked for fruit from the fig tree in the vineyard.

Remember, Jesus said, "*By their fruits you shall know them.*"

The first thing to notice is that the production of fruit is *natural* for a tree. It's expected. A mature fruit tree — whatever the kind — is *naturally* going to bear its fruit in due season. The more *mature* the tree, the

more plentiful the fruit. (Those of us with gray hair need to take notice! Maturity and “moral productivity” are supposed to go together.)

God expects that we human beings are going to produce something good, something desirable in our lives. That means it isn't enough for us simply to abstain from evil. God is looking for *positive good* from you and me. He's looking for *virtues*. That's the word: virtues. And it's as logical for God to expect this as it is for a Mesa County orchard owner to look at a mature peach tree and expect that – in the proper season of the year – his tree is going to have good peaches on it.

Now the wonderful thing about the parable in today's gospel is that it shows us *the character of God*. It's not God's nature to rush to judgment. It IS God's nature to give us another chance. It's his nature to consider what might help us be the fruitful people he intended us to be.

When we look at the parable of the fig tree in the vineyard, some readers think they see God in the person of the vineyard owner and Jesus as the gardener who asks God to delay his judgment for a while. But look again. Look at the owner: he is demanding and impatient; he wants fruit right now; and he's ready to cut down the fruitless tree. That doesn't sound like the character of God shown in the New Testament.

No, in this story I think the character of God is portrayed entirely by the Gardener. The Gardener cares for the barren fig tree and nurtures it. He begs for leniency, compassion, and – above all – patience from the owner. He's willing to give the fig tree another chance to show its potential. *God is like that!*

Who is like the vineyard owner? We are! We'll give people a little extra time, but we're ready to write them off if they fail to measure up to our expectations fast enough. We're ready with our axes sharpened to chop down the ones we judge to be *inadequate*, or *non-productive*, or even just *not what we want*. — Fortunately, God is not like *us*.

God is patient and gives us what we need in order to start bearing fruit. He helps us. And that's where the fertilizer the gardener put around the tree comes in. The way I interpret Jesus' story, the *fertilizer* that God wants to use in our lives is produced by our repentance. The Biblical word for “repent” used here means “a change of mind,” a new way of thinking. We need to change our minds and turn away from sterile, self-centered and judgmental thinking that makes us look for happiness in all the wrong places —such as fleeting physical pleasures and transitory material “stuff”, or in putting other people down in order to build ourselves up. My home-grown metaphor for the process is to say that repentance “takes the garbage of our lives and turns it into fertilizer,” fertilizer that can help us bear the fruit God wants.

God wants to bring out the best in us. So he helps us as we work through the process of repentance, the process of living into a new way of thinking that produces fruit, the harvest of virtue in our lives. A modern paraphrase of Romans 12: 2 puts it like this: *Don't become so well-adjusted to the world that you automatically conform to it. Instead, fix your mind on God. When you do, you'll begin to be changed from the inside out. Recognize what God wants from you, and decide to DO THAT. Unlike the world – which tries to drag you down to its level – God will bring out the best in you.*

I don't want to end without offering a few examples of the fruit that the Lord is looking for from you and me, once our thinking has been transformed. The main fruit God wants, I think, is constant hunger for an ever-deeper connection with him. Isaiah said, *“Seek the Lord while he wills to be found. Call upon him while he draws near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the evil ones their thoughts; and let them turn*

*to the Lord, and he will have compassion.”* How many of us – even us church folks – have made a serious commitment to be God-centered people?

A second fruit is *mercy*. Jesus said, *“Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.”* Mercy is the flip-side of unselfishness; unselfish people are usually merciful people. To “show mercy” to another person simply means to meet that person’s needs. So . . . If *I’m* hungry, and *you’re* merciful, you’ll feed me. If *I’m* lonely, and *you’re* merciful, you’ll spend time with me and be my friend. If *I’m* wracked with guilt, and *you’re* merciful, you’ll forgive me and set me free.

A third fruit is *faithfulness*. Fidelity, or faithfulness, is an essential Christian virtue. The Bible shows that our God is a promise-keeping God. It’s *God’s* nature to be faithful. *We’re* the fickle ones. Think how different our world would be, how different our country would be, how different our church would be, and how different our families would be *if all of us just ‘kept faith’ with one another?* ...If we simply lived up to our commitments, our promises, our duty. Our baptismal vows. Our marriage vows. Our ordination vows.

God is willing to be patient with you. So you need to decide to be patient with yourself and other people. It takes *time* for fruit to develop. Virtues don’t manifest themselves overnight. Don’t get in a hurry. Repent. Change your thinking. Center your mind and heart on God and make union with God your highest aim. —Fruitfulness will follow! I promise.