

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year C, 2004  
Luke 13: 1-9  
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

A man planted a tree and waited for the tree to bear fruit. Year after year, he came to the tree, hoping to find some figs. Year after year, he was disappointed. He decided to remove it, but his gardener intervened. Let me work with the tree, the gardener said. Let me till the soil around it to loosen it some and put some fertilizer on it. Let's see what it will do. Maybe we can salvage it. If not, then dig it up and throw it away.

When I read this story I'm reminded of my guava tree that I once owned, when I lived in the Florida Keys. A neighbor gave it to me. He had it in his yard for several years and it did not produce. He decided that he wanted the spot for a key lime tree, so he set about digging the guava tree up. I thought that this tree had potential, so I asked him for the tree and he gave it to me. I dug a big hole in the coral fill that is the Florida Keys' answer to top soil. Then, I went out and bought good top soil and potting soil and mixed them in even parts. I mixed some Miracle Grow fertilizer in with the soil, because I felt like this tree needed a miracle, and, with a prayer for that miracle, I planted the tree. At first, the shock of moving it caused the tree to die back and we ended up pruning it severely. I thought for sure that it was going to die, but my wife said to give it a chance. Suddenly, it started to grow. In its first summer it gave me a few guavas. In the years after, blossoms fill the tree each spring and I was rewarded with more fruit than I could use and give away, and the tree grew like wildfire. I was patient with it maintained hope for it, and my patience and hope paid off.

What is Jesus saying to us, today, in this parable about the fig tree? I think that his point is this: When God created us, when he made us, as individuals, he made each of us with the potential to be wonderful and to serve him as a disciple of his Son, Jesus Christ. He made us with a capacity for faith, hope and love, for service and obedience. And God gave us gifts and skills that make us unique. He did this not only for our pleasure and satisfaction, but also for the good of his world and his own enjoyment. God has a hope, if you will, a dream, for each of us, and reduced to a nutshell, that hope, or dream, is that we will love him with all that we have in us, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

The Church understands and teaches that we show that love for God and neighbor by acts of discipleship, by imitating Jesus. This imitation of Jesus is, if you will, the fruit of the soul, the produce of the Holy Spirit working in us to bring us to the glory of God. If we bear fruit, God is glorified by our actions. If we don't bear fruit, is our value in God's eyes diminished?

Unfortunately, I think the answer has to be yes. Fortunately for us, our God is patient with us. He's not in a hurry to cut us off, to throw us away. This is the point of our Lord's parable in this Gospel reading. God is patient. He is willing to till our soil, to fertilize and water us and give us a chance to become what he made us to be. In fact, he is far more patient than any of us can dream of being. He is willing to give us the rest of

our lives to come to him, to forgive us for our failures, to give us chance after chance. Because in his eyes, we still have potential, and the potential to love others as he loves us. The human potential is to become fully alive, to be "all that we can be."

In biology, there is a concept of "teleology," that life forms unfold towards an intended end. Thus, a seed that is planted becomes a tree. That tree matures to the point that it buds; the buds become blossoms; the blossoms become fruit. The end result, the fruit, is why the tree exists. The fig tree exists for figs. Any other purpose is incidental. So it is with all of life. We exist for a purpose and that purpose is to bear fruit that pleases God. That fruit, St. Paul tells us, is "faith, hope and love." And, Paul tells us, the greatest of these is love.

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons was the first really great theologian to arise in the Christian Church. He was a second century bishop; just a few years removed from the apostles themselves. He taught us to understand the fullness of the Incarnation as indicative of the true value that God places upon humanity. One thing that Irenaeus said always seems to me to be the epitome of the Christian insight into God. Irenaeus said that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. God created us to be fully alive and to be fully alive is to reflect the Glory of God.

Most of us are afraid to respond to God's call to live fully in Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament reading today, Moses was afraid to accept God's call to serve him because he thought himself unworthy. God saw beyond Moses' limitations. God sees beyond our limitations. God sees us as we could be and should be and calls us to the fullness of his glory. He calls us even now. *Amen.*