

øLifeø Fertilizerø
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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Isaiah 55:2

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Luke 13:6-9

Then [Jesus] told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So 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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

How many of you would call yourself a gardener? How about just growing anything ø caring for a plant in your yard or in your home? A fern, a rose, maybe a cactus?

Maybe we arenø all gardeners, then. Letø try this; how many of you would say that youøre responsible for your own life? *All* of you are, whether you want to be all the time or not. Some of you might be responsible for young childrenø lives, as well. Even if you arenø a gardener, you have a living thing that you care for ø yourself.

Keep that in mind, and hear the Luke scripture for today again:

Then [Jesus] told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So 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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

I want you to think of your life as a fig tree in that vineyard. You are the gardener, and God is the owner; God, who wants you to fulfill Godø purpose for you ø to thrive and

bear fruit in order to bless others and multiply those blessings. God, who does *not* want you to miss the opportunity to live fully and richly.

Hopefully saying that God is the owner of our lives and it is for us to tend to them so that they grow healthfully is not a big stretch for our imagination. But, what about the part of the parable that says "Cut it down"? *That's* a little scary, to be honest. What is Jesus saying? That if we don't shape up that we will simply be removed? Cut down? Our chance taken away? Rather than condemning the unrepentant to death, the writer of this gospel uses Jesus's words here are meant to instill a sense of urgency in preparation for the apocalypse, which includes a final judgment. From Luke's understanding, those who failed to repent would be left out of the kingdom of God, the vineyard of God's Reign. To repent would be a positive action of turning away from destructive behavior and turning toward a covenant life with God.

Even though we do not have the same context as Luke, we can read these verses with the same sense of urgency: we have responsibilities in the kingdom of God, that kingdom and Reign that is here now *and* to be fulfilled in greater glory in the future. Jesus's parable as given to us by Luke is not a threat on our lives, but an urgent warning that for us to truly live, to thrive in the kingdom of God, we must turn away from destructive behavior and bear the fruit of God's purpose in our lives.

What is the fruit? And why is it important?

It is not enough to simply not be doing harm. We are also required to bear fruit. Fruit is something that gives nourishment *to others*. When the Bible tells us to bear fruit, it is for the sustenance of God's kingdom. It is God's kingdom in which each of our lives ó our own little fig trees ó are planted. It is God's kingdom that gives us the soil to grow

in. And it is God's purpose for which we bear fruit. Why is following God important? Why is being *Christian* and shaping our lives along that of Christ important?

It is important to follow God and it is important to shape our lives along that of Christ's because we need hope. We need joy. We need to make a difference, to make our world a better place so that it's better for us AND for our children to grow. Because there are things in our world that are against God's love. Because there are things like war that bring hunger and pain and devastation in too many people's lives. There are things like drugs, and greed, and murder, and poverty that make *our* lives worse.

Our world and the people in it need the fruit that each of you can provide, just as you need of the gifts and fruits of other people.

What is the fertilizer to get this important fruit?

To grow that fruit, we need to make sure that we're giving our lives the best possible ground in which to grow that fruit.

I recently heard the story of a man who moved into a house on a flat mesa with hard clay soil. The former owner had planted *many* kinds of fruit trees into that hard clay soil, hoping for a rich and bountiful harvest, but they never really did well. There was a horse-farmer living next door, and the new owner went over to his neighbor's house once a week for a wheelbarrow load of horse manure. He spread the horse manure on the ground as mulch year round. Within a few months, those same barren fruit trees became healthy and productive. Before he moved into that house the fruit trees didn't have a chance to grow, and the former owner had blamed the poor soil ó even with all of that magnificent fertilizer next door! It was not poor soil, only neglected soil. All it needed

was the addition of organic material ó good *fertilizer* ó and the garden soon transformed into a little fruit paradise.

What we surround ourselves by impacts the quality of our lives and the fruit that we can produce. If we surround ourselves by negative things and take those in for our nourishment because they are the only things available, we *will* produce negativity. As the saying goes, òtrash in, trash out.ö It is very difficult to produce the kind of fruit that makes our world a better place with soil that is hard.

The Isaiah scripture says it well as it depicts God rebuking the people for doing just that ó expecting satisfaction and nourishment out of òthat which is not bread,ö and laboring for òthat which does not satisfy.ö Instead, God says, òeat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.ö

There's a scene in a film that I think of often, a scene that reminds me both of the evil in our world *and* the goodness and innocence that is possible in spite of it. The film is *The Blind Side*, featuring Sandra Bullock as an upper-class mother and Quinton Aaron as a homeless high school boy named Mike just trying to be invisible, despite his rather noticeable height and build. One of my favorite scenes in the movie is when Sandra Bullock's character asks Mike how he avoided becoming just like the violent despair-filled world in which he grew up. Mike's only answer was òI closed my eyes,ö and the movie shows Mike as a little boy sitting on a couch, with the sound of yelling and crashing objects around him, shutting his eyes tight against the fighting.

We cannot close our eyes against every bad thing in the world. In fact we *shouldn't* close our eyes, turn our heads away, because those can be the very things that stir us to action, to recognize the evil in the world and to be compelled to do something

about it. But we also have to recognize when those things are beginning to shape us. When we are beginning to *learn from* them instead of *reacting against* them. When children are being formed, those should not be the things that they are learning from. When we are taking our cues of how to act in the world, we should not look to those examples. And we should not even become desensitized to them, treating them as if they are normal. I like the example of Mike closing his eyes against the violence around him because it shows the innocent soul of a boy who knew that that's not what he wanted to get used to, knew that it's not what he wanted to be shaped by. He knew that it hurt people, and since he couldn't do anything about it, he did everything he could to avoid inflicting the same hurt.

We can choose our sources for nourishment, the fertilizer with which we surround our lives, our fig trees.

Lent

We are in the Christian season of Lent. Lent is usually a season of repentance, of sacrifice ó giving up the things that distract you from God, those things that you might even idolize as the most important things in your life, putting them above God's love and desires for you. Rather than sacrifice, though, I like to think of Lent as a time when we *remember* the important things in our lives. The more we fill our lives with these important things, the less room there is for the things that don't satisfy. If we have surrounded ourselves with the nourishing things, we are less hungry for the things that don't satisfy, the things that do not give us the nourishment we need.

Lent is a time to remember God's gifts to us, to put God and God's desires for our world back at the top of our priority list. Lent, in other words, is a season to spread life's

fertilizer, a season to surround yourself with the things that nourish you so that you can bear fruit that changes the world. So that *you* can claim hope and joy and make the world a less fertile place for things like greed, and poverty, and selfishness.

You're going to have to put some work into it. You're going to have to (metaphorically of course) take your wheelbarrow and load it up with a lot of really good fertilizer *regularly* and surround your life with it, and leave out all those things that don't actually nourish you.

The first step to surrounding yourself with the good stuff is figuring out what the good stuff actually is. So I'm going to give you the basics right now. As I say these things, most of them will seem obvious. More often than not, though, the obvious things get neglected more than any other, and we ignore them in favor of spending our time on things that don't satisfy. So when you're picking out your fertilizer, don't forget the obvious, and spread it liberally.

1. Surround yourself with **forgiveness**. I didn't get to hear it, but Senior Pastor Emeritus Gay Hatler preached a sermon last month and taught us a quotation that said "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." Until we have forgiven others and ourselves, we are feeding ourselves bitterness and regret instead of building relationships for the future.

2. Surround yourself with **prayer**. Pastor Chuck Blaisdell is in the midst of a sermon series called Praying with the Stars, which he'll pick up again next week, highlighting different aspects of prayer. Be intentional in your praying. Make a time to do

it regularly, and then add it in to random moments during the day, too. Pray for people you love, pray for people you really don't like. Pray and let God transform you through it.

3. Surround yourself with **healthy habits in your finances, eating, exercising, and learning**. Associate Pastor Don Sarton has been leading a Family Finance 101 class, with one Sunday left, learning about how to manage your family finances to get out of debt and match your "treasure" with your faith. Eat well. Exercise regularly. Always try to learn new things about the world around you, even if that's just by watching the news or listening to someone's story.

5. Surround yourself with **volunteering** – activities in which you give of yourself to others. There is always need for all kinds of talents, and if you need help finding the right place for you, ask on

6. Surround yourself with **friends**, people with whom you can share laughter and meaningful conversation. Spend time with people you love and who love you.

7. Surround yourself with **gratitude**. Give thanks. Thank God for the blessings in your life as well as the hardships. When you are giving thanks for *everything*, bitterness has very little room to grow.

8. Finally, **find your own passions** that give you joy, and make sure you set aside time for them. They are important.

We have the work of changing the world to do, church. Our work may be overwhelming. But, as our Regional Pastor Jose Morales wrote in his last regional update, "maybe this will help: we do not grow the tree. God's raining grace and radiant

love do that. We do two principal things. One, we scatter seeds, which Jesus defined as sharing the message of the kingdom (see Matthew 13:1-23). And two, we prepare the world and the Church to be a plot where the abundance life is raised from kingdom seeds, a seed bed in which justice and righteousness are developed and cultivated.

Beloved Regional Church, he says, "scatter seeds! And till the world! God will take care of the rest."

Surround yourselves with things that help you to bear fruit. *Gorge* yourselves on the rich foods that satisfy. It's important. If you don't, the world will be lesser, and your life will be missing fulfillment. If you *do*, you *will* make the world a better place now and for our children in the future. YOU will be someone that nourishes others. YOU will produce richness that satisfies. *You* will have the hope and joy of God.

Amen.