3 Lent, March 3, 2013; Psalm 63; Luke 13: 1-9, The Rev. Mary Trainor

Oh, fig trees are so beautiful! They grow well in warmer climates than ours, so we don't know much about these types of trees here. They are beautiful trees to look at, but the main reason to plant a fig tree is figs. Figs are not only tasty fruits, but they are good for us for they are high in potassium, iron, fiber and calcium. We enjoy figs mostly in one kind of food: Fig Newton cookies! But, you can make lots of things with figs: cakes, smoothies, salads, pizza, breads - yummy. Cooked figs were used like sugar in historical times, and this continues today in the Middle East.

Our Gospel lesson today talks about fig trees. Before Jesus tells the parable about the fig tree, however, we hear a conversation between Jesus and some of the religious people. These were devout people who attended church regularly and talked good religious jargon. On the surface, they were viewed as the holy people. They, in those days, would be seen by others as the church people! Here, they are telling Jesus about what some other people did, and they are angry about it! Their anger is full of superiority in it. They expect Jesus to join right in, and condemn those people - but He doesn't. Instead He turns the tables on them, and calls them on their arrogance, telling **them** to repent. Jesus says, "***I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish***." We are deep in the season of Lent now, the season of repentance. To repent is to turn away from our old, self-centered lives, and turn towards God. It is the step we do after confession, for it involves action. There is urgency in Jesus' voice here. We need to do something or we will serve those consequences, and none of us want that! What are we to do, and how do we do it? The parable of the fig tree helps us here. A parable is a story with a moral lesson, all the players being symbols. Here, the fig tree is symbolic of us, the people of God, and the gardener is God.

A farmer who grows fig trees, along with grapes, in his vineyard was out examining his crops, looking for fruit on the tree. After all, it had been long enough, and this tree was supposed to be producing a bunch of figs by now! But it wasn't producing, it was just taking up valuable agricultural space, and he was not happy. To bear fruit literally means, "**to produce a result that is wanted or desired.**" So here, with us as the fig tree in the parable, producing fruit is in reference to how we live out our faith. Do others get to know God through our words and actions? In John 15: 16 Jesus says, ***"I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last."*** The fruits we are to bear for God are found in Galatians 5:22-23: ***love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,gentleness and self-control.*** " Do people we encounter out there know we are Christians by how we behave, by how we treat others, especially those who are poor and in need or who make mistakes?

OK, so the owner of the fruitless tree ordered the gardener to "***cut it down***." Whew! This is the consequence of not bearing fruit. For us it is not living out our purpose for God. But, wait, fortunately the story does not end there - for the gardener (God) says "***let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”*** This is the Good News of Jesus Christ: we have more time, we have another chance! The gardener is going to take care of the fruitless tree -- cultivate it, nurture it, and wait and see what happens. Oh, there is not an infinite amount of time, but there is time. Unless we apply what we learn from God's Word, we are like those people in the beginning of this Gospel lesson -- church goers who don't walk the walk.

In our culture, we too can mistaken church going for being a Christ follower; they are not the same thing. Garrison Keillor (author and radio host of Prairie Home Companion/Lake Wobegon, and an Episcopalian) says, **"You can become a Christian by going to church just as about easily as you can become an automobile by sleeping in a garage."**

Oh, make no mistake, going to church is very important -- for it is here we take intentional time out to receive God's nourishment. The essence of our repenting, our turning towards God, is found in that absorption. Every single day (not just Sunday), God offers us His cultivating and nurturing. But we have to choose to hunger for it and absorb it. Our Psalm 63 captures this message so deeply: "***O God, eagerly I see you, my soul thirst for you...my soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast."*** If we claim the strength that God gives us, we will produce the fruit. In this Gospel Jesus actually uses the word "***manure***." We here in the Wisconsin farmlands know the value of good rich aged manure, full of potassium -- a nutrient necessary for fruit bearing. And just as the turning over soil enables the plants to obtain more nutrients, Jesus turns us over as we grow, enabling us to absorb more of Him. The fertilizer for our roots is the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross to save us. We will sing this in a few minutes when we sing, "**Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee; let the water and the blood from thy wounded side that flowed, be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power**."

Martin Niemoeller, imprisoned at the Dachau concentration camp for seven years, learned the lesson of the need to live out His faith with courage the hard way. He wrote: "**In Germany, the Nazis first came for the communists. I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. They came for the Catholics; I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time, there was no one left to speak for me."** Martin survived the Holocaust, butwas filled withregret about not having lived out his faith by helping others. He was so grateful for having been given another chance, and dedicated the rest of his life (39 years) to absorbing God's nourishment and bearing fruit by working for peace. God gave Martin and the fig tree another chance, and God gives us another chance to repent and to bear the fruit that He expects us to bear. Jesus has done and is doing His part. Will you choose to do your part? Tell God that you need Him, satisfy that hunger through prayer, worship, study, service, and then watch how His nurturing shows in your life. Amen.