

Vicar Noah Herren
Third Sunday in Lent
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Growth from the Ashes

I have spring fever. Considering it's my first year in Chicago, there have been numerous warnings: "Don't put away your winter coat! Winter's not over yet." And yet here I am...deep cleaning my apartment, unpacking my summer clothes, buying tightly budded daffodils and watching them blossom in a sunny window. I'm longing for the abundance of spring while still aware that winter isn't quite over.

Liturgically it makes sense too I suppose, since Lent is derived from the old English word for "spring season." On this third Sunday of Lent, we look forward to the joy of Easter while knowing there are still a few wilderness days ahead.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells the parable of a fig tree that hasn't borne fruit yet, bringing us vivid imagery of unrealized potential. The landowner in the parable becomes frustrated with the tree and commands the gardener "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down!" This terminal judgment seems to have resonance with Jesus' response to the crowd when they asked about some recent untimely deaths. He says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

But aren't we all dying? Aren't we all perishing everyday? Just a few weeks ago, we received ashes on our foreheads with the words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Faced with failing bodies, senseless violence, natural disasters, and lost loved ones, we are constantly reminded of our impending mortality, the ashes of our lives. Maybe the caution from Jesus here is not that we will die, because that's a given, but instead, that it would be a tragedy to die without bearing fruit.

A couple of years ago, my family and I learned that my mom only had a few weeks to live. In the days preceding her death, she told us that she wanted her ashes to be planted with a mulberry tree. So, the morning of her memorial service, my aunt and I drove out early to my grandparents property. We brought shovels, a special mix of minerals, a 5-gallon bucket of horse manure mixed with soil, and a mulberry tree. My aunt is a gardening wizard and made the planting much easier than it would have been otherwise. Digging around in the dirt, mixing mom's ashes with minerals, placing manure and mulch. With our dirty hands, we held a special tension in the cycle of nature: acknowledging the passing of a beautiful life, while laboring for the thriving of a new life. Cultivating growth from ashes.

"Why should I be wasting soil?" the landowner continues in his condemnation of the fig tree. This sounds a lot like the voices in our world that commodify everything and value profit above all else. These voices tell us we're only worth what we produce. In his book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, forester Peter Wohlleben, explores the rich social lives of trees, how they communicate and survive together through their root systems. He calls it the "wood wide web." Larger trees will modify their growth patterns to allow younger trees access to resources of sunlight and water. Evidence is found of sustenance being given to the remains of a tree that had been felled 400-500 years earlier. He states, "Every tree, therefore, is valuable to the community and worth keeping around for as long as possible. And that is why even sick individuals are supported and nourished until they recover. Next time,

perhaps it will be the other way round, and the supporting tree might be the one in need of assistance....A tree can be only as strong as the forest that surrounds it.” This knowledge of trees leads us to the truth of our own interdependence with one another and all of God’s creation. The adept gardener in Jesus’ parable sees what is going on beneath the surface...what is hidden: the value of the tree beyond its visible productivity...the tree’s connection to a larger network of life. He negotiates an extra year for the tree so he can tend its growth, not for the sake of production, or even life, but to help the tree grow into its original purpose, what it was created for, bearing fruit.

Death leading to rebirth. Barrenness leading to growth. As we explore these Lenten themes, the gospel gives us the image of trees, which in the words of Hermann Hesse, are the “most penetrating preachers.” We find shelter under their canopies, absorb their years of wisdom, and enjoy the fruits they bear. There is a richness in this metaphor that mirrors the complexity of our lives. Perhaps that’s why Jesus chose to use parables in response to the peoples’ black-and-white questions about the nature of suffering and death in the world. Writer Debie Thomas suggests that we ask a better question, she says: “...because ‘why’ is just plain not a life-giving question. *Why* hasn’t the fig tree produced fruit yet?” She says, “Here’s the manure, and here’s a spade – get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world?” She responds, “Go weep with someone who’s weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things. Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.”

The sense of urgency in Thomas’ words and in the gospel reading today call us to live into who we are meant to be while we have time, to bear fruit. We don’t do it alone: God tends to us as a loving gardener, our communities root and sustain us, our fruits contribute to an abundant, thriving world.

A few months after we planted my mom’s tree, I stopped by to visit my grandparents. We walked down to the site and noticed that there were several mulberries beginning to grow. In an effortless and almost reflexive motion, my grandmother picked one of the ripe berries and popped it in her mouth. The imagery of ashes turned to fruit didn’t escape me.

May we all carry the image of ashes turned to fruit as we gather at the table of abundance and continue this Lenten pilgrimage together, living into who God created us to be. Open to the dismal days of wilderness and the days of radiant sunshine, we receive the good gifts that God provides for the journey. Amen.