Third Sunday in Lent March 24, 2019 Pr. Craig Mueller

More Than You Wanted to Know About Manure

I probably shouldn't say the four-letter word in church. I don't want parents to have to answer too many questions on their way home from church. So I'll just say "manure happens" and I think you know what I mean.



When the U.S. Food and Drug Administration wanted to limit the use of animal manure as part of its overhaul of

safety regulations, organic farmers were hopping mad. Every farmer depends on fertilizer. But organic farmers obsess over it. As farmer Jim Crawford said, "we think of manure as the best thing in the world, and they think of it as toxic and nasty and disgusting." He adds that the green material from the previous year's crop all mixed with black manure—rich and full of good microorganisms—it's the best and brings wonderful fertility the next spring.

I have to admit I don't think much about manure. When I do, I remember the smell of some farms in Nebraska where my grandparents lived. For most of us, manure and the four-letter s-word repel us. Even if it is part of life.

We'll get to the part of the parable with the manure, hold on! The first part of the gospel is both comforting and disturbing. When a tower falls on a bunch of people, Jesus is asked if it was because they were worse sinners than others. It's the question of the ages. Why do bad things happen? Is God punishing us for something we did or didn't do? Jesus emphatically answers: absolutely not! In other words, to paraphrase the Alabama theologian Forrest Gump, "manure happens." Life is unfair. There are natural disasters. There are accidents. And sometimes troubled or hate-filled people take the lives of others who are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Manure happens!

But then Jesus adds: unless you repent you will perish as they did. Ouch! Remember, "repent" means to change your mind and to think about thinks differently. For me, this means if manure happens, if life is unfair, and if you never know how many days you have left, let your life count. Otherwise you will perish in our own anger, fear, or resentment. Maybe you have a different interpretation.

But now for the stinky part, I mean the manure. I'm sure you've heard sermons about seeds and trees, weeds and wheat, rocks and soil, sun and rain. But this is your lucky day for a manure sermon. In Luke Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that doesn't bear fruit. I have a beautiful seed catalog that is fun to look at even if I don't order seeds. But I don't see figs anywhere in the catalog!

In Matthew and Mark Jesus curses the fig tree. But Luke goes a different direction. Remember that Adam and Eve cover themselves with fig leaves. In the Hebrew scriptures, figs can represent both blessings and curses. And in Jesus' parable, the fig tree hasn't borne fruit for three years which isn't surprising as it can take 4 -5 years for fruit to appear.

One writer sees herself as the vineyard owner and the tree all at once. Like she is her own defendant, judge and jury at the same time. She said the parable breaks her heart because it happens all the time. We are impatient with ourselves and others . . . the one who does not produce and the one who harshly judges the lack of production in others. Yet God is the one saying, give it one more year! My thoughts are not your thoughts, says the prophet Isaiah!

Don't cut the tree down. Let it alone for another year. And the manure: you can't just pour a heap of stinking fresh manure on a strawberry plant. It will be too potent. The plant will die. You have to get your hands dirty. You have to do some digging around. You have to mix the manure with the dirt. And then see what happens.

It's a strange thing to say in a sermon: there is treasure in the manure! We know that is literally true because manure has amazing nutrients and makes the best fertilizer. But I want you to give some thought to it from a spiritual perspective. What might we learn from the parts of ourselves or the parts of life that repel us, or that we avoid, or the things or people that we think stink to high heaven? Or to say it differently: how is your garden growing this Lent and what kind of manure, i.e. fertilizer, do you need so that you can produce fruit, so that you can more fully be yourself, so that you can live your baptismal vocation?

It's Lent. Lent means spring. And shoots are coming through the ground. As we sang in psalm 63, we thirst for God as in a dry land where is no water. We yearn for the kind of authentic life that money cannot buy as Isaiah reminds us.

Well, it's time to reveal the book title that captivated me this past week: *Holy Shit: Managing Manure to Save Mankind*. The author uses his experience with both farming and waste management and covers the field, so to speak, with topics like how to select the right pitchfork (now that's an image!), how to compost pet waste, and how to get ourselves over our paranoia over human waste, if you know what I mean.

And he also talks about composting. Composting breaks down food and waste and becomes fertilizer for the soil. What a great image for Lent! It was several weeks ago that we remembered that we are earth creatures, made from the soil, marked with ash on our foreheads.

If you don't already, consider composting as a spiritual practice, not only for the good of the earth but to connect you more closely to decomposition and thus to growth. After Paisley, one of our seminarians a year ago shared her passion for composting, Holy Trinity has a composting bin in our garden and composting buckets throughout our building.

Here is my hope for you this Lent. Meditate on manure and composting. It's holy shit, after all. And be glad for one more year. One more spring. One more Easter. One more year to trust God more than money. One more year to forgive yourself and others. One more year to see your weaknesses and imperfections as the manure that may hold treasure.

Lent is a time for some spiritual fertilizer. So dip your hand in the baptismal font. Eat and drink at this table. And notice the earth coming alive this spring. And you coming alive as well!