

The Third Sunday in Lent
March (10 &) 11, 2007
Sermon on Luke 13:1-9 by The Rev Timothy A Leitzke

Some of you probably have heard *hundreds* of sermons preached on the template of ‘Three points and a short poem. For example: “¹Bad things happen to everyone. ²God still loves you. ³Try to love one another. ‘Roses are red, violets are blue, Jesus loves me and he loves you, too.’” This scene in Luke 13 hinges on three points, geometrically speaking. In English, three points in a row mark an ellipsis, an omission of words needed to complete the sentence. An example is, “All those in favor...” I never said what to do. We guessed my intentions. We supplied the missing words, words indicated in the text by three points. There’s some ambiguity with ellipses. How many of you, hearing, “All those in favor...”, would have said, “Aye”? How many would have raised your hands? You don’t know which response I wanted. My ellipsis makes things ambiguous.

The most notorious ellipsis in the Bible is in Genesis 4:8 when God has favored Abel’s sacrifices over Cain’s. “And Cain said to Abel his brother...” Our Bibles supply Cain’s line, “Let us go out to the field.” There is no line in Hebrew. We’re left wondering what Cain said to Abel right before he killed him. Luke 13:9 has its own haunting ellipsis. The text I read to you said, “If it bears fruit next year, well & good.” The ‘well & good’ are additions. The vinedresser says, “and if it bears fruit in the coming year...” What? What will happen if the fig tree bears fruit? The vinedresser never says. That tree’s life hangs on an ellipsis. Its whole existence hinges on three points on a page.

We get to that ellipsis because some people tell Jesus about some Galileans whom Pilate had slaughtered. They tell him about this just as he's finished warning them that judgment is coming soon and they need to repent *now*. It's almost like they're saying, "Yeah, you're right, Jesus. In fact, here are some sinners who wouldn't repent." Jesus has just preached the Law, God's judgment, and the people love it because they see how it applies...to other people. We humans have a penchant for pinning judgment on others. We hear of others' misfortunes and say, "Well, that's what you get for acting that way." Jesus replies, "Do you really think these people who are suffering are somehow worse than you?" The people talking to Jesus were so eager to mete out divine justice that they didn't notice that they were on their own hit list.

The parable is a response to those who think they are safe from judgment and are swift to judge others. From that point of view, the people are represented in this parable by the owner of the unproductive fig tree. We are the vineyard owners. We want to cut down the tree. Jesus plays the vinedresser, urging us to wait and allow him to work his grace and forgiveness. The parable asks us, "Are we eager to cut down what God would redeem?" Luke offers no conclusion. We're left, wondering, with an ellipsis.

Jesus' parable suggests that cutting down this tree would be an act of evil concealed as an act of good. When I lived in RI I had a lot of flies and mosquitoes in my apartment until they mysteriously vanished. I soon learned why when I saw the huge web of a brown recluse spider hanging between two bars on my balcony

railing. The web was loaded with unlucky bugs. That poisonous spider was the most effective pest control I ever had. I could have killed her; she was dangerous. If I had, the bug bonanza would have returned. There was evil concealed in what looked good, and there was good concealed in what looked evil. Friends of Christ, our actions—when not done in the Holy Spirit—are evil. We try to do good, and we cause harm. We try to fix a problem and we just make it worse. We pick what is attractive, what feels good, what glows with warmth, what appears glorious. The problem is that God's beauty and goodness and warmth and glory all are hidden. God is revealed in something uglier, more painful, colder, and disgraceful—God is revealed in a crucified Christ.

In the parable, the vinedresser suggests that he be allowed to dig around the tree and put manure on it. 'Manure' is a polite translation. Manure is waste. It's toxic. That's the vinedresser's magic solution for the unfruitful tree. At least on the surface, that doesn't make any sense. Yet we know that manure is fertilizer. Something toxic and nasty is helpful to the tree. Spreading it won't be the most pleasant experience in the world, but it's going to make things better. God often is concealed in things that we think of as bad.

In all of this, the tree is helpless. It's a tree; it cannot speak in its defense. It just has to sit there, while others determine its fate. I remember being in second grade and sitting in a dark anteroom outside of the principal's office. I'd been assigned to write an advertisement for a certain pizza franchise. I loathed their pizza. When we'd eaten it at home my whole family got food poisoning. I refused

to write an ad for them. I was an unfruitful student, so the teacher sent me to the principal's office, and I sat there while they determined my fate.

I identify with that fig tree, and I think all of us can. Its only hope was in the saving work of the vinedresser. All of us have had times when our only hope was in someone else's saving work. With our eagerness to cut down what God would save, with our propensity to call the good evil and the evil good, our only hope is in the saving work of God in Christ. Our hope is in a God willing to be human, willing to suffer as one of us. Our hope is in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ tear apart the Sin that separates us from God. They open the wellspring of life. They redeem us. They fertilize us. They save us. In our Baptismal bath we are plunged into the crucifixion of Christ and we forever bear the sign of the cross, the sign of something so good that it defies description, yet appears so evil that we don't want to think about it. Our hope is concealed. Our hope is in the ellipsis, in the omission. Our hope is in the hidden end of the sentence, "and if it should bear fruit in the coming year..." We live our lives clinging to our hope in a happy completion of that ellipsis. Our lives hinge on three points. ¹We are eager to cut down what God would redeem, ²because what is evil looks good to us and what is good looks evil to us. ³We are helpless, yet our hope is that the God unseen will make good on the promises of the God we have seen, Jesus the Christ, risen from the dead.

I've given you the three points; I owe you a short poem, now. It's a hymn written by Herman Steumpfle, one of my professors of preaching at Gettysburg.

Draw near, my people, hear a song of sun and rain and soil, of vines deep rooted in the earth, whose branches climb and coil. With joy I watched the greening leaves, the clusters on the vine, and waited for the harvest time when grapes would promise wine. But though I pruned each branch with care and nourished every root, the vines, for all my husbandry, bore hard and bitter fruit. Upon a hill I'll plant a vine, though dark as death the sky, and from its branches pruned by pain, the wine of life supply. My people, branches of my vine now spread through every land, go, bear love's fruit that all may share the harvest I have planned.

Note: On Tuesday, March 13, following a long battle with ALS, Herman Steumpfle died in Gettysburg, PA at the age of 83. I'd debated ending the sermon with this text; I'm glad I did. Herm is sorely missed by all who knew him.

-Pastor Tim Leitzke, former student