

Sunday, March 24 and Wednesday, March 27, 2019
Third Sunday in Lent + Luke 13:1-9: "Just One More Year"

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

Rev. Nancy M. Raabe

Link to today's texts: <https://bit.ly/2JzRJ5P>

From the story of the fig tree, we just heard gardener says to the owner:

*Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.
If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.*

There were times in my life where I was not bearing fruit. During the late 1980s I was languishing in graduate school in Boston, writing freelance music reviews and going nowhere. Then out of the blue I got a call to interview for music critic of the Milwaukee Sentinel. Being a girl of the coasts, I didn't even know where Milwaukee was--I thought it was in Minnesota! Eight years later I was out of work when the Sentinel merged with the Journal. After despairing over my future for a year, I was called out of the blue to interview with the Birmingham News. I saw the trip as a kind of lark, just to say I'd once set foot in Alabama, but I didn't expect to be swept off my feet by the warmth of the people, the beauty of the place, and a great job offer. Bill was supportive, so leaving his family in shock, off we went to the Deep South.

The music scene in Birmingham was lively at the time, but I quickly discovered that the soul of the South lived in the visual arts. I found story after story to write about. One I followed closely was centered in twin abandoned warehouses in a time-forgotten corner of downtown. The building had been scheduled for years to be torn down, but the city was spinning its wheels. With each passing year the building got more run down and beaten up.

Then along came Anne and Peter, two artists with huge hearts. They had a vision for an organization that would support local artists and provide free art classes for any and all children. Anne and Peter came across these twin warehouses and managed to buy them for a

song. Space One Eleven was born, and soon there was more life bubbling behind those formerly blank windows and flowing out into the world than I could keep track of.

Children found their voices by making art. They cultivated a knowledge of the past, a deep awareness of the present and discovered a bright future that lay before them. Perhaps Space One Eleven's greatest achievement was a 60 x 100-foot mosaic designed and handmade by these children that was mounted on the long side of the big civic auditorium. It weighed 112 tons and depicted a brightly-colored mythical dragon rising up out of Birmingham's industrial past. The children sculpted all 28,000 tiles from local clay and laid them piece by piece into huge iron frames. The first frame was mounted for the opening of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, and three more followed.

What does all this have to do with the fig tree in today's Gospel reading?

Whoever in the city government that wanted those twin warehouses torn down must have sounded like the vineyard owner in today's story. "For years they have been an eyesore. They serve no purpose. Tear them down! Why should they be wasting valuable real estate?"

This is the urgency that Jesus brings to the first part of today's Gospel reading. He draws on two recent events in Jerusalem to emphasize the precariousness of life. A group of pilgrims from Galilee were massacred by Pontius Pilate for reason other than Pilate's brutality. A tower in the wall around Jerusalem collapsed and randomly killed 18 people.

In both events, lives were extinguished without warning. These people did nothing to deserve to die. None of them were worse sinners than anyone else. There's no answer to why they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus' purpose is to point to the fragility of life and the pressing need to return to God.

Jesus tells the crowds, “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Perish here means to live, and perhaps to die, without returning to God, without knowing Jesus Christ as God with us, God for us, the face of forgiveness, the arms of love, the one who will never let us go, the one who suffers with us in life’s darkest times with the assurance that life, not death, has the last word. God wants us return to God. This is what we call repentance, a daily turning to God that begins in our baptism. We rejoice that Colton Alexander Ramminger is beginning this journey today.

This is where we find the key to the story of the fig tree. The hammer of judgment had fallen on fig tree just as it did on that building in Birmingham. But God’s mercy outweighs judgment. As we are about to sing,

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea;
there’s a kindness in God’s justice that is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth’s sorrows are more felt than up in heav’n.
There is no place where earth’s failings have such kindly judgment given.

God’s mercy is wide and God’s patience vast. Just one more year to cultivate the tree. Just one more year to loosen up the hard ground. Just one more year to fertilize the soil. Just one more year to see if it will bear fruit.

In God’s time, though, “one more year” does not mean a calendar year. God’s infinite patience and mercy creates a kind of rolling delay in the hope that new life is always possible if time for cultivation is allowed.

Take the case of the building in Birmingham. Its decline over the years actually fertilized the soil in which it could bear fruit. The more dilapidated the building became, the more the city wanted to get it off their hands. We don’t know the outcome of the fig tree. Did it live or not? Maybe the gardener tried something different. Maybe he used a new kind of manure. Or

maybe the weather the following year was more favorable. Who knows? But that one more year gives birth to hope.

There are times when you may be tempted to place the hammer of judgment on your own heads. I'm not good enough, I'm not worthy, I can't do it, I'm a failure. In those times, cling to the assurance that wide sea of God's mercy will sweep you up in ways you could not have imagined.

In Boston I felt like a failure because I hadn't completed my graduate program, but then the opportunity sprang up to go to Milwaukee. After my job there was eliminated, I felt like a failure because I was out of work for a year, and then got the call from Birmingham. When we moved to Ohio for Bill's job I felt like a failure because I was once again out of work with limited skills, and then God told me to apply to Trinity Lutheran Seminary. When we came to back Wisconsin there was nothing for me here either for more than a year, and then Bishop Mary Froiland said, "Let's find you a call." It all took time. Never did God close the door on my future. Instead, unknown to me, God was cultivating my faith that whole time using the same hidden forces by which tender shoots sprout at this time every spring. Just one more year, just one more year.

Greet each day with renewed hope. God is there, just waiting for you.

Amen.