

**Sermon “What’s in Your Fertilizer?”**  
**Olivet Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Reverend Lisa Eleck**  
**03/20/22**

**Luke 13: 1-9**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’

Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, 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.” ’

**Sermon “What’s in Your Fertilizer?”**

I have an African violet that is blooming. Now that may not seem note-worthy to you. But I have never had African Violets that have lived. This one was given to me by a friend who has a green thumb for African violets. It only had a few stems and a few leaves and was planted in a tea cup when she gave it to me. Now it has many pinkish/purplish blossoms and lots of leaves. It is outgrowing the tea cup. For me, that is impressive.

I don’t know what I have done wrong in the past. Maybe I put the other plants in the wrong window, or didn’t water them properly, or was not sufficiently attentive to them. But this plant, I peak at daily. I seem to be watering it at the right time. And it is growing beautifully. It needs to be transplanted into a bigger container. That will give the roots enough space to grow and be able to absorb water and nutrients from the soil. That African violet will need some TLC. For that, I will get help from my friend.

The gardener in our scripture passage from Luke wants to give that barren fig tree some TLC. The owner of the vineyard wants to cut down the tree because it has not produced figs. After three years, one can expect the tree to produce figs but, as yet, there's nothing. But the gardener intercedes on behalf of the tree. He suggests loosening the soil and adding some manure – nutrients to feed the roots – and giving the tree another year – more time. He wants to give the fig tree a second chance to bear fruit. He convinces that land owner, who sees the fig tree as “wasting the soil,” to show mercy.

Second chances. The gardener in Jesus' parable understands that a second chance, the opportunity for the fig tree to produce good fruit requires giving it attention and nourishment. Producing good fruit doesn't just happen. The tree can't be left alone and be expected to flourish. It takes tender loving care.

Our lives are like that. We are called to produce good fruit. We are called to do God's work – to love our neighbor by doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God.

To produce good fruit, to live the lives that God desires us to live, requires intention, attention, and nourishment. It starts with the desire to bear fruit, to become aware of what we need and what we need to do. Then we can turn to Jesus to receive nourishment. Jesus is ready to provide that. And we work at it.

As followers of Jesus, we look at ourselves and admit our shortcomings. We call upon the Spirit to guide us. We believe that Jesus' teachings and his love offer us nourishment. And we trust that Jesus is with us; knowing what we need, tending to us and feeding the roots of our beings, our souls, with the love they need to thrive. We believe in a merciful God who gives second chances so that we might transform ourselves and produce good fruit.

During Lent, we think about transformation. The Greek word is *metanoia*. It means a change of heart *especially*, a spiritual conversion. It can involve taking a new perspective, a new way of relating to the world, perhaps a new way of being.

Now, Jesus' usually tells a parable and then shares the explanation. But this time, he did it in reverse. He shared the parable after his teaching about when bad things happen to people and the need for people to change their lives.

In Jesus' day, people believed that when tragedy struck an individual, it was in response to his or her bad actions. They also believed that when someone did not suffer from tragedy, it proved that they were good. This made it easy for good people to be judgmental and to see themselves as better than others.

Jesus explained that when bad things happen to people, it is not God's retribution. He cited the example of those who were killed by Pilate during worship, while they were in the temple offering sacrifices and those who died when the Tower of Siloam, a tower in the wall surrounding Jerusalem that was alongside a body of water, fell on them. These people were not worse sinners than Jesus' listeners. Jesus explained that their deaths were not punishment because they were greater sinners than those who were listening to him. God does not inflict pain or suffering on people because they did something wrong.

Yet, it's still common for people today to ask similar questions. When we are suffering we may ask, "What did I do to deserve this, God?" A common, painful question, people ask it when diagnosed with a serious illness. Or a person asks it when they see a loved one suffering, "What did he or she do to deserve this, God?" But Jesus assures us that God does not punish people with suffering or by having terrible things happen to them.

God does not inflict pain on people. People, society or governments may do that. Individuals can cause another pain by saying hurtful things in anger. Corporations may cause pain when they announce a multi-billion dollar merger which benefits shareholders or owners of the company while simultaneously announcing layoffs for workers, who then suffer financial hardship. Governments can cause anxiety and fear for parents and children by demonizing parents of transgender children when defining their actions as child abuse because they take steps to affirm the gender that their child identifies with.

God does not inflict pain. Rather God is there offering support, tending the hurting with love. And as followers of Jesus, we are also encouraged to offer love and support those who struggle.

Kate Bowler, in her devotional entitled, "Right After It's Over," tells the story of hiking in the woods and being transfixed by a tree that had fallen over a cliff, but lived. A traumatic event for the tree, Kate describes the tree's efforts to live. She points out that the roots had grown thicker. Branches sprouted from the trunk and started growing horizontally. Then those branches turned upward and grew toward the light. The tree had survived the trauma of being broken but was able to adapt and then grow. It may have struggled but it persisted, choosing growth. Kate reminds us that in through our struggles, we are growing. Over time, the tree was transformed and grew as it chose life.

During our Lenten journeys, we are choosing life. We are seeking transformation as we approach Easter and resurrection. Like the fallen tree, we can be transformed and continue to grow.

Like the fig tree, Jesus, the gardener, will provide what we need to transform our lives so that we might produce good fruit. Following in the way of Jesus, we can support the lives of those who struggle and offer love that can transform their pain into hope.

As part of our Lenten reflections and journeys, we first take a look at ourselves. We think about what we need to encourage in our own transformations – starting at our roots.

We ask: Are there things that have a grip on us that we need to loosen to enable the air, water, and fertilizer to reach our roots? Do we need to loosen the grip of anger or resentment? Do we need to let go of old ways of thinking, of old habits that no longer serve us, or old hurts that we hold onto despite the fact that they do not promote growth?

We ask: What fertilizer do we need? What fertilizer do we need to feed our roots, to sustain us on our Lenten journeys, and to support our transformation so that we might better love and serve our God and our neighbor? Do we need to feed our roots with patience, prayer, scripture, discipline, awareness, justice, empathy, forgiveness, hope, joy, or love? When we decide, we can ask God to feed our roots with what we need. And if we're not sure, we can ask God to choose the fertilizer.

In the rear of the sanctuary, there are sticky notes. I invite you to choose a word or words that might feed you at your roots this Lent. Then pin that word to the bulletin board. If you do not find a word that resonates with you, please write a word that is meaningful to you. And it's ok if a word goes on that bulletin board more than once. Remember, as followers of Jesus, we enter this sacred time together.

And as you leave today, I invite you to take a fig to bring home. When you bring it home, I invite you to pause for few moments with that fig. Then taste that fig and think about how the efforts you make during Lent can help you to grow your faith and produce good fruit. Remember, our God is a God of second chances. Our God showers us with grace and mercy, feeds us with love, and is always willing to help us produce good, sweet fruit.

