

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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Rio Rancho, NM

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## THE CARE AND NURTURE OF YOUR SOUL

Luke 13: 1-9

It's spring. It's Lent. Time to tend to your garden. Time to tend to your soul. In our reading from the Gospel this morning, Jesus combines the two-tending your garden and your soul. Both have to do with life, productive life.

Only Luke tells us the parable of the unproductive fig tree. A man plants a fig tree in his vineyard and waits three years for that tree to produce. But there is nothing, not any figs. So he tells the vineyard keeper, "Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?" But the vineyard keeper responds, "Sir, give it another year while I fertilize it and water it. Let's see what happens. But next year if there are no figs, then let's go ahead and cut it down."

Now we all know that in a vineyard there is competition for the nutrients in the soil. Perhaps this fig tree needed more fertilizer and water than it was getting. Now with just the right amount of both, there would be a chance for that fig tree to produce.

Now we don't know the rest of the story. What did the fig tree do the following year? We can only speculate, but we tend to supply the answer with our basic orientation toward life. If we assume that things never really change, then I suppose we figure that fig tree was a goner. But if we believe that unexpected things are possible, then we imagine eating figs off that tree the following year. Your perspective, should we call it your faith, does matter here.

So Jesus' parable is about a fig tree that was barren for three years. Maybe like your own life in some respects. Have you ever endured a spiritual slump, an off season for your soul? A lean time, a sparse time, a hard time for your spirit? An extended "dark night of the soul"? Maybe you are going through such a time right now. It seems those seasons visit all of us sometime.

It is hard to explain to someone else exactly what that feels like. God seems so distant and disconnected from your life. Your relationship with Christ seems oh so vague. Prayer seems flat and uninteresting. Worship becomes mere ritual without feeling. Even the relationships with your nearest and dearest bore you. As the old song says, you are "running on empty." It's three years without a fig. It's a season without joy.

Thankfully, this parable suggests that there is hope for that barren fig tree. The vineyard keeper says, “I will dig around it, water it, put fertilizer on it and see what happens.” In other words, that tree needs extra care and nurture. That tree requires special attention, all in the hope that figs are just around the corner. The tree is not cut down. The tree is cared for. And so should we for our own souls.

During Lent we remind ourselves that the spiritual disciplines of the church are precisely for your soul’s welfare. Sometimes we simply need to go back to the basics, the nutrients that feed our souls. Let me ask you a couple of questions, not to make you feel guilty, but to make you feel hopeful. These questions are asked in the spirit of the vineyard keeper who refused to give up on that fig tree. And I

think Christ refuses to give up on any of us, however unfruitful we may have become.

So here are some questions for your Lenten self-inventory. First, when is the last time you read your Bible? Read it meditatively, expectantly, read it without interruption, seeking a living Word for your own life? Read it in the privacy of your own home, quietly and slowly? Now I don't think the Bible is like Aladdin's lamp that you rub and a genie comes out to grant us three wishes. Rather the Bible is more like an ancient text that the Spirit of God can still use to provide living water for your thirsty spirit. Maybe that is why we need to offer a prayer for illumination for the Spirit's inspiration.

I would suggest that during Lent you consider reading through Luke's Gospel, the finest of the four in my opinion. Read the Good News of Jesus' words and works and relationships. Read all about his life, his journey to Jerusalem, his death and then his resurrection. It is the best-told tale of the best news humans have ever heard. It is still the greatest story ever told, one that can inspire us and motivate us. Maybe even lift our spirits and make the juices in our heart and mind come to life.

A second question. When is the last time you really prayed to the living God? Quietly, passionately, deliberately prayed to your Lord and Savior, who loves you with an everlasting love? When is the last time you poured out to God your anxieties, your worries, your illnesses, your strained relationships, your lost hopes? Really prayed, as

though Someone was really listening who truly cared?

Maybe it's time for a long walk to talk with God. Or a time of silence away from all the media and noise, alone with the God of your life. Or maybe get up early and watch the dawn break in conversation with the One who knows every word before you speak it. Maybe it's time for some confession, some healing. Or a time for gratitude and thanksgiving, a time for reclaimed joy.

A third question. What are you doing with your life? How about this? Do something with your life! Become more generous with your time and your treasure and your talents. Find a way to help someone older or younger who needs what you have to give. Reconnect with a friend, especially one who is hurting. Recommit to your church family, tell people you appreciate them and value them and are glad

they are in your life. Directly, face to face, or if you are too shy, an email or an actual handwritten letter! Tell them you love them, no, you really do love them.

Maybe you could reach out to folks who are quite different from you-ethnically or politically or theologically or economically or educationally. Maybe even share your faith. Rekindle your curiosity about the world and all its wonders and all its challenges. Walk away from the television and the computer and the cell phone. Listen to nature or listen to some great classical music. Start on your spiritual autobiography to share with those you love.

In other words, try something different, rather than that tired old rut that is simply a long, narrow grave. For the sake of your soul, do something with your life that gives you

meaning and gives meaning to others as well. Something for others, for the church, for the world, for our broken political system. This is your pastoral Lenten nudge: Do something for Christ's sake. Really!

Think of what your personal vineyard keeper wants to do for you. Dig around your soul. Water it. Ok, put some manure (or something comparable) on your soul. All to see if you will bear fruit. Fruit that will bring joy to others and joy to your own soul. And joy even to our Lord.

In her grand book **Amazing Grace** Kathleen Norris has a lovely essay entitled "Detachment". She tells how her husband David fell into a deep depression, a depression so severe that he was hospitalized for several weeks. During his hospital stay, Kathleen discovered that David had become

so disoriented that he had canceled their medical insurance. So now they faced the prospect not only of mental illness but also medical bankruptcy, which is the cause of almost 67% of all bankruptcies in America.

So Kathleen in her anxiety talked to a friend in New York City who asked her, “What are you doing for yourself? Are you seeing a counselor? Did you take something for your anxiety?” Kathleen responded, “No, I am ok. I have been praying the psalms.” Her friend asked her incredulously, “And that’s enough?”

And this is what Kathleen said, “The funny thing is that was enough. I was not praying the psalms alone but with the Benedictine sisters in my town. They had graciously taken me into their small convent near the hospital, offering me a

guestroom for as long as I needed it. There is no way I can measure the help they gave me. Not the least of it was providing my first occasion for laughter in many days.”

During David’s stay in the hospital, she had the opportunity to visit with one of the Benedictine sisters. They talked about the season of the year, which happened to be Lent. This sister had decorated the convent with spring flowers and lively colors. She explained, “Most of my life I have thought of Lent in terms of self-denial. Now I still fast but my reasons for fasting have changed. Now I think of Lent as a time of waiting and burgeoning hopes.”

In the fellowship of wonderful Benedictine sisters, her pastor, her church family, her extended family and friends, and a very helpful attorney, Kathleen Norris got through that

difficult Lenten journey. And so did her husband David. Her soul was fed daily by the praying of the psalms, the fellowship of sisters and brothers in Christ, and that “burgeoning hope” that expects even barren fig trees to bloom and bear fruit yet again.

The care and nurture of your soul is a matter of utmost importance. Whatever condition your soul is in, remember this: time and patience, tending and watering, care and nurture can make it flourish once again. For your sake and for the sake of Christ who loves you. This is our “burgeoning hope” this Lenten season. Thanks be to God. Amen.