

3rd Sunday in Lent
“FERTILIZED FAITH”
March 10-11, 2007

TEXTS: I Corinthians 10:1-13 and Luke 13:1-9
Rev. Chad E. Hoover

To the church of God located here at Trinity Lutheran Church and School in Traverse City, to you who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and called holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

In our epistle lesson, St. Paul says of the Israelites, “Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them.” Is God pleased with most of us? Is God pleased with you?

Is He pleased with how you treat your family when nobody’s looking? Is God pleased with how honestly you deal with others in your workplace? Is God pleased with the movies that you chose to rent this weekend or the selection of music on your iPod? Is God pleased with how content and grateful you are for the many gifts that He has blessed you with? Is God pleased with your service to others, your willingness to help someone on the side of the road who is stranded with a flat tire?

Is God pleased with how quick you are to judge someone based upon the way they look, or talk, or dress, or act? Is God pleased with the lust that oftentimes motivates you – a lust for money, a lust for power, a lust for recognition, a lust for worldly passions? Is God pleased with you when you look at your watch and think, “I wonder how long Pastor Zagore’s sermon is going to be today?” Is God pleased with you when

you sit back and think, “I don’t care how long his sermon is, I could listen to Pastor Hoover preach all day!”

Well, you could answer those questions in one of two ways, really. You could answer, “Yeah, I’m doing alright. No worries! God’s got to be impressed with my efforts and my high level of personal sacrifice.” Or, you could answer, “No, I’m not doing alright. I fail God time and time again. How could He possibly be pleased with me?”

I.

When we confess our sinfulness and recognize where we’ve fallen short and missed the high standard of perfection which God requires, then we’ve realized that we are like that worthless fig tree that doesn’t bear any fruit at all.

Jesus told this parable to a crowd of thousands of people¹, “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

The truth is, many times we are like that landowner who is so quick to judge. God might not be pleased with me, but He’s certainly not pleased with those people or that person or these sinners. “That fig tree’s dead, cut it down!” How quick are we to cut down our neighbor and discredit him, to pompously point out his sin and declare him to be fallen from grace?

(In a gossipy tone): “Or did you hear about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices? How awful! It seems, though, that something like that was bound

¹ cf. Luke 12:1

to happen. I'd wager it never would have if God were happy about what they were doing?"

"Or did you hear about those eighteen people who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think maybe they deserved that? Was it some kind of punishment from God, maybe?"

We ought not look at the sinful actions of our neighbor without first taking a good look at our own sinfulness. That's precisely what Jesus did for those people in today's text, He directed them to their own sins rather than the sins of those victims who died. Furthermore, Jesus pushes them beyond the simple issues of life and death and gets them to think about the greater issue – the eternal resting place of the soul. He tells them, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Jesus is not saying that an unrepentant person will die some nasty and horrible death like those Galileans did or those 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Jesus directed those crowds and directs us today to an understanding of what temporal death without faith and repentance means. He's talking about death in its deepest sense, a spiritual and eternal death.

Jesus never shares with His hearers the fate of that fig tree. Which really leaves them and us hanging on the impact of His previous warning, "Repent or perish!" Can you do it on your own? Is God pleased enough with you that you don't have to worry about perishing? The answer to both of these questions is, "No." On your own, your fate would be that of that fruitless fig tree. You and I would perish. We'd be cut down and lost forever. And quite frankly, that's what we deserve.

But God, in His graciousness is patient with us and gives us every opportunity to bear fruit. In the parable, the vineyard

worker pleads with the master, "Sir, leave it alone for one more year . . . If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

II.

And that may sound like good news, and it is. But that still leaves the ball in our court. It stills leaves us to make the first move before God will act and save us from perishing.

Does God's patience with us simply buy us some time before the inevitable happens, i.e. the fig tree gets chopped down? Because no matter how much time you're given to produce good fruit, a decrepit dying fig tree is *not* going to bear fruit. And it can be very easy to fool ourselves into thinking that we're doing alright. We can look at the tough lot that others have drawn in life (like those Galileans whose blood was spilt by Pilate and mixed with their sacrifices) and think, "I must be doing something right! I'm not as bad off as them!"

But that's where St. Paul's warning to the Corinthians comes in, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

So, how do you know if you are standing firm? How do you know you're not destined to perish? After all, there is pressure from all sides in this world of ours. Not only from the world, but also from within our own flesh. There is a struggle, a battle, and many times we do fall. How can we be sure that in the end we'll be standing firm?

The truly Good News is that we *can* be certain that we won't share the fate of a fruitless fig tree, not on account of our own efforts or ability, but on account of Christ. Christ does not sit idly by hoping that we make *good choices* and in the end stand firm. He has done and continues to do much more than that for you. He is like that worker in the vineyard who pleads with the master to have patience with us (lifeless

sinners) and promises, "I'll dig around it and fertilize it!" Christ has promised to give us everything that we need to produce the fruits of faith that God requires.

The first thing the fig tree needs is to have the old soil cleaned out. On account of our sinful flesh, we too need to be cleansed. Christ did that for you when He came down from Heaven and took human flesh, lived a perfect life in your place, and sacrificed Himself on the cross for your sins. As promised, He sent His Holy Spirit to give you life and continue His work which He started for you. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit unites you with Christ so that your sins would be dug out like that old, stale, and innutritious soil around that fig tree.

Next, the fig tree needs to be fertilized. Christ does that for us too. In Baptism, He gives us something new! He fills us with faith and life, which fertilizes our soul and gives us a heart of repentance. As a new creation in Christ, we can recognize our sin, confess it, and receive from Christ absolution, that is the forgiveness of sins. And as proclaimed in our catechism, "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

Christ continues to nourish that new man He's created in us. Just as the vineyard worker tends to that fig tree, which was all but dead, Christ tends to our faith, filling us with His Word and feeding us with His good gifts through the Lord's Supper.

III.

God is not quick to give up on anyone and neither should we be. It is His desire that all men would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.² There is a reason and purpose for us being here. We are not just taking up soil, we are God's ambassadors in this world. As a new creation in Christ, the

Holy Spirit is working through you, digging around the fig tree and putting down good soil for others in this life. That good soil is the good foundation of Christ's Word!

God can and will work through us. That is why we should be careful not to discount, discredit, or downplay anyone's faith or lack thereof. Even that fig tree in our parable looked all but dead, but there was hope that it could still be fruitful and serve the master's needs. Or, like a log in the camp fire that looks like it's flame has been completely snuffed out, but when a breeze comes by and feeds those embers with oxygen, the flames burst forth once again. The Lord is patient. His grace is sufficient for you and nothing is impossible for Him.

Lord knows, He's saved us from certain death and perishing on account of our sinfulness. We may never know how the Lord is using us to fertilize the faith of someone that is perhaps struggling or in need of God's encouraging Word. What an honor for us to bear fruit for the benefit of His kingdom and to be chosen by Him to provide that service to someone else.

Conclusion

Because of Christ, we can stand firm with great confidence!

THOUGH IN YOUR SINFULNESS YOU ARE LIKE THAT
DEAD FIG TREE, YOU WILL NOT PERISH BECAUSE
CHRIST NOURISHES YOU WITH HIS WORD AND
SACRAMENTS SO THAT YOU WILL STAND FIRM IN HIS
TRUTH AND BEAR MUCH FRUIT FOR HIS KINGDOM!
In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

² cf. I Timothy 2:4