

A Load of Manure

By Rev Todd Farnsworth

Luke 13: 1-9

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. 7 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?’8 “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

My wife and I had a deck on the back of our house up in MA. We would sit on it and sip coffee. Stare off into the woods behind our house and occasionally spot a cardinal or a rogue coyote running through the neighbor’s yard. During the summer months we would also tend to the large pots that formed a ring around the edge of the deck. 6-10 pots that

contained tomato plants, cucumbers, peppers, bush beans and herbs. We enjoyed the fresh veggies we got and were even able to freeze a bit of it as sauce come the Fall.

When we moved to our next church in MA, there was no deck. There was, however, a large yard to the side of the house. Full of sun, we were excited about the possibility of digging a small patch of earth and resuming our summer harvest activities. We approached the trustees and inquired about putting in a small garden, and they quickly agreed. One of them even offered to come rototill for us. We were elated.

Now, given our previous gardening experience, we were thinking a plot of 6x8 would be pretty amazing. That's about 2 pews worth of garden. We could put up a little chicken wire around it to keep out the groundhogs. It was going to be a little bit of heaven on earth...and no pots!

Well, it was Memorial Day weekend and we had finished with the parade, and the craft fair and Martha and I left the house about an hour before dinner to run a couple of errands. I think we went to Staples to get some pens or something like that.

As we drove up the street to our house we were greeted by a sight I will never get over.

A tractor was plowing up the yard on the side of our house. It had already made a lot of dirt in once was a lovely lawn. The bucket loader on its front was carrying heavy rocks into the woods behind the house. And another trustee was unloading his rototiller in the driveway.

I cannot tell you the words that came rushing up from my stomach as I drove past this scene in slow motion. I confess they are not decent words. But I was some surprised. In the spot where we had envisioned a 6x8 foot veggie garden, was a 30x40 patch of mud...and torn up grass clods and rocks and a few very confused worms.

We were overwhelmed. On one hand it was a grand gesture. On the other hand, it was a GRAND gesture.

We had no idea how to fill a beast of that size. We had no idea how we would tend to it.

Fortunately, we were naturals and the garden was filled with a huge variety of vegetables and flowers and that summer it brought forth a chest freezer worth of bounty and a lot to share with family and friends and anyone else who would take a few tomatoes off our hands. I believe we had 30 tomato plants.

Anyway, it turned out great. Very exciting lots of fun.

And as the summer went on, a few members advised us that it would be even better next year if we used some of the neighbor's dried horse dung for fertilizer. Being novices, and excited to harvest even more bounty to share with the Sunday school the next year, we tucked that info away, and come Spring, we called up the neighbor and arranged for a "drop."

Again, it came as a surprise...and a big surprise. We had gone out for a visit to Martha's parents and when we came home there was a load of horse manure beside our garden, like I had never seen before It must have

been 5 feet high and 8 feet around. About half the size of this circle up front here. It was a lot of poop!

Jesus knew the difference between good manure and toxic waste. He could tell that the dung being flung by those who were following him was the kind of fertilizer that burned the community's spiritual roots!

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no!

We've all heard this pious poop before.

- Only the good die young.
- God needed your loved one more than you and so plucked her from the garden.
- God intended us to sell the environment so that we could be rich.
- Wealth equals God's blessing upon a person. Poverty equals God's anger with an individual.
- God shows favor by putting people into positions of power.

Well, we were not as wise as Jesus and we spread the manure we were given all around our garden. Shovel by shovel we evened it out and rototilled it in, and by mid summer we realized that we had made a mistake. Plants were yellow. Burned out. Weedy. Dying. Crops were weak despite our constant attention. Apparently the load of manure had worked against us.

We had not heard Jesus' admonition. We did not recognize that there were different kinds of manure.

Jesus said, *"I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."*⁶ Then he told this parable: *"A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any..."*

Jesus tells a parable. It's not about figs. I believe it's about fertilizer. It's about that earthy agent of change and how we tend to God's garden with it. It's about whether we recognize good fertilizer from bad fertilizer. And the way we make the distinction, is in the fruit that is born from the process...and whether we recognize the fruit that is grown.

When we hear things in the news, at work, at church that leave us feeling diminished; that cause our soul to wither up, we need to think of those bits of wisdom as "bad manure."

When we encounter someone who is spouting a theology of hatred or division (which is the antithesis of Jesus' teachings) and find ourselves or our community growing in that direction, we should recognize that rhetoric as "bad manure."

When we experience language or experiences that stir our soul and cause us to think of God in ways that draw our roots deeper into community; when we can feel our leaves reaching up to be warmed by the Son; when the fruit of compassion, forgiveness, and love begin to be harvested; we can celebrate that we are in the presence of some very good...poop. Good fertilizer changes us toward God. Good fertilizer helps us bear the spiritual fruit of kindness and love for one another and God.

Jesus responds to the bad manure he has heard by telling us this morning's parable, and it ends with hope...and a warning.

“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?’⁸ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”



Jesus gives us time to apply better fertilizer to the crops of our soul, but he knows, that given enough bad poop, our little gardens will shrivel up and die. Let us seek out the good manure and nurture this garden we've been given to tend.

Let us listen for words of hate or healing. Let us watch for acts of violence or compassion; destruction or construction. Let us know the difference between the loads of manure that are dropped on our yard, daily.

May we grow our gardens to Jesus' glory. Amen.