

Luke 13:6-9

Christ the gracious Gardener

He expects to find fruit

He patiently works to produce it

In college and seminary, I spent a lot of summers doing grounds work. I dug out many dead and unproductive trees. In the beginning, I made a lot of calls on my walkie-talkie to ask my boss to take a look at a tree to tell me what it was and if it should be where it was. Several times I made the mistake of acting on my own, just to get back to the shop and proudly show off the fruit of my labor to my boss's dismay. "*That's not dead,*" he'd yell, "*we can save that. No wonder you want to be a pastor!*" With my untrained eyes, I saw brittle, leafless limbs and peeling bark and assumed the tree was as good as gone. He, as a skilled gardener, saw living bark and traces of foliage. I saw death. He saw possible life. The same thing happens in spiritual matters. We have a gracious Gardener whose eyes are more perceptive than our own: Christ is our gracious Gardener who expects to find fruit, who patiently works to produce it.

New Year's is a time to examine ourselves. With this parable in mind, we carry out this self-examination knowing that our gracious Gardener expects to find fruit. Self-examination is not an easy process. It is unsettling, as it well should be. When we honestly gaze into our innermost self we see things that we don't like—things that scare us. Decay, hypocrisy, darkness, ingratitude, selfishness, lust, anger, impatience, doubt, unfaithfulness, laziness, and arrogance.

We are God's children. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He can see our shame and He knows our every misstep. It is complete vanity to try to hide reality from his eyes—to pretend He only watches us the hour we are here and not the other 167 hours of the week. Look in yourself, look at your past, and see the sinful reality, because only when you see your sin for what it is—sin—can you be ready for God's grace. God sees your dead leaves of sinful actions, your peeling bark of sinful words, your withering though hidden roots of sinful thoughts. He sees them all and knows that life is leaving you because your sin is forcing it out. He knows it, and if you free yourselves from the denial and semantics and hiding that we as sinners get so good at, you will know it as well.

When you do this, you will be tempted to lose hope. You will think there is no way God can love you. You will smell the very fires of hell, for they are what we all deserve and they are what we will all experience if we refuse the grace of God. But don't despair. You are supposed to feel this way. Luther calls it *Anfechtung*. It is the only acceptable sacrifice we sinners can offer God, for as David says in Psalm 51, "*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise*" (v. 17). When we honestly examine ourselves, knowing that our gracious Gardener expects fruit from us, we see a lack of spiritual life and an abundance of spiritual death. But God sees repentant saints ripe with potential for life. God, like my boss with the well-trained eye, sees potential life and seeks to cultivate it with the tools He uses so well: Word and Sacrament. For our gracious Gardener not only expects to find fruit when He looks at us, but He also Himself patiently works to produce it.

I did some research on fig trees before this sermon. They are hardy trees that thrive best in poor soil. One man said he had tried for three years to get rid of one and failed. There would be innumerable trees that would grow effortlessly in the same place and with the same soil that this fruitless tree the Gardner interceded for was wasting. A gardener worried about immediate results and pounds of harvested fruits would have immediately ripped this tree up several years earlier. He would definitely not be giving it a fourth year. But Jesus is not like other gardeners. He is concerned with each individual tree and He is determined to make it what it is not: alive and fruitful. He patiently works until this is the case, pruning, fertilizing, and shooing away the birds and insects.

Christ sees the dead branches of our sin and prunes them. He grafts them into the tree of grace, the tree on which He died. He fertilizes those withering roots, watering them in our Baptism, which brought our dead souls to life. He feeds them with His body and blood, which renews our life with His own life, given for us once for all. He shoos away those sinful desires that try to nest in our branches with His Word, shouting out His promises of grace and shining the light of His life guiding law. He takes us, dead trees that we are, and gives us life, His life, through the working of the Spirit through the Means of Grace.

If seeing ourselves for who we are without Christ was painful, seeing ourselves for who we are in Christ is euphoric. How gracious and patient is our Gardener. He expects fruit, but He knows we cannot produce it on our own. See your sins and shortcomings from the year we are now leaving and leave them there. Leave them on the tree that is the cross. Grow in the year to come. Bear fruit in abundance, not because you can on your own, but because Christ will patiently lead you to do so. Let Christ daily water you as you remember and relive your Baptism with daily repentance and forgiveness. Be fertilized by the body and blood of our Lord today and as often as it is offered, for your roots will never grow too strong for this food. Be pruned and protected and spoken to by Christ through His Word as you meet Him every day there and listen to Him speak through the mouth of His ministers in His house.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine acknowledges that when he continually postponed surrendering the sinful pleasures of the world, he was in a sense praying, “*Give me chastity and continence, by not just now.*” Do not let that be your prayer this year. Rather, when you see dead leaves and branches and bark and roots, when you see your sin, confess it, and Christ will take it away; and in its place He will bring forth fruit, fruit that will not spoil for all eternity. Thanks be to Christ, our gracious Gardener. Amen.