

## Luke 13:6-9

The definition of insanity is: “Doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result.” For three years the owner of the fig tree in our text came expecting to find fruit, but he found none. He was not insane. “*Cut it down!*” he ordered; “*Why should it use up the ground?*” He knew, as its owner, that the tree was not going to change into a fig-bearing tree no matter how much time he gave it. The vinedresser, also, was not insane. He did not beg the owner to leave the tree alone. He agreed that to expect different results, some things needed to be changed with regard to the tree. “*I will dig around it,*” he offered, “*and put on manure.*” If different results would not come after this then, yes, “*cut it down.*”

In His parable, Jesus is speaking of the tree of God’s people. God sent prophet after prophet to them throughout the Old Testament; but the results were always the same: He found no fruit on the tree. And then the vinedresser came to dig around it through the preaching of John the Baptist. And manure was put on it through the teaching and preaching of Christ, but still no fruit was found.

And so that tree was cut down. In the First Century, the year 70, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. Not one stone was left upon another. And the children of Abraham were dispersed out into the world. The Land of Canaan, which had been given to them, was no longer theirs for they were not producing fruit. They were just taking up space in the vineyard.

Everything that happened to God’s people then, writes St. Paul in our Epistle, is written down as an example for us. We are God’s fig trees today. We do not own ourselves; God owns us. He created us and all that we have. He bought us with the blood of Christ. He claimed us in Holy Baptism. You and I are not simply trees; we are trees planted by God in His vineyard. He has the right, therefore, to expect to find fruit.

But we should not think of God in this way--as a prune-faced, tight-lipped ogre, with axe in hand, ready to cut us down if He does not find in us exactly what He is looking for. You are His trees, which means that He loves you, and He takes care of you. He has planted you in His vineyard - the vineyard of His Word and Sacraments. He doesn’t wonder, therefore, if He will find fruit; He knows that you will bear fruit. “*The Lord loves a cheerful giver,*” the Bible says; not just in giving money, but in giving everything. Who doesn’t love a tree that cheerfully gives its fruit in its season? And so with you. The Lord loves to see the fruit that is being produced by you, His precious trees. He is not surprised to see the fruits of faith in your life; He expects to see them. And He does see them because you are His trees planted in His vineyard.

But does it ever seem to you like you’re just taking up space? We see nice fruits being produced in the lives of other Christians, more than in our own life. We see others working hard for the spread of the Gospel. We see others giving generously to the Lord with joy. We see other congregations growing. We see other trees in the vineyard covered with fruit, but we don’t see the same fruits as much on our own tree.

So what happens in us? Frustration. Stress. Guilt. Envy perhaps. But trees do not produce fruit well at all when they are under stress. A tree that always has its eyes on the trees around it will not be cheerfully producing its fruit in its season.

Now God, of course, is not insane. He knows what does and does not work to produce fruit on His trees. One thing He does not do is to leave us alone. No, He must dig around us and put on manure.

That digging is the part we don't like. It disturbs us. So when God preaches His Law to us through the mouth of His pastor, we as sensitive trees, prefer to close our ears or run and hide. But that's not what is best for the tree. If you and I are to keep producing fruits of repentance, the digging of the Law must take place. In the Old Testament, God's people rejected His call to repentance. And so when John the Baptist came with his shovel to dig, he was locked away and put to death. That's the example God wants us to avoid.

Now all that digging with the Law does no good if manure is not put on it. And that is the Gospel. What! Manure? Christ? Yes. Any farmer knows the value of manure in causing his crops to grow. This growth for the tree comes from the Gospel. But even more, we all know where manure has been. Chewed up, and without getting too graphic, discarded. That's what animals do. They discard their manure and walk away from it as something they only want to be rid of. This is how Jesus was treated, and by His own people. They discarded Him. They chewed Him up with whips. They dumped Him on a hill outside their city. They left Him to rot on a cross. They only wanted to get rid of Him as if He was manure.

So of course, this means that your pastor is one of those manure spreaders that we hate to follow on the road because he is called to spread the Gospel of Christ. But then, so are you. And truly, to the eyes and noses of the world, the Gospel of Jesus is nothing but worthless manure. But to us who are God's trees, there is no sweeter-smelling aroma, for the blood of Christ is not pungent and offensive to us, but it is our forgiveness and salvation. *"The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."*

Now if a tree - one of God's own precious trees - is not improved by the digging of the Law and the putting on of the manure of the Gospel then, yes, God will deal with that tree. He is patient and longsuffering, but He is not insane. Such trees will be cut down either in this life or in the Judgment.

But as for you, you are not just taking up space in the vineyard. Maybe you don't see your fruits so much. But listen carefully, for this is the absolute truth...the best fruit of all is simply to be here in the vineyard. Remember Mary and Martha? Martha's fruit was to work in the kitchen. Mary's fruit was to take up space at the feet of Jesus and listen to Him. Mary's fruit is the fruit Jesus was pleased with. *"Blessed are those who hear the Word of God,"* says Jesus. *"My sheep hear My voice,"* He says. All other fruits depend upon the fruit of hearing the Word. When God's trees take up space in the pews and before His altar, that congregation is blessed.

You are blessed for being here. God's doesn't need our fruits, but we need His forgiveness. Your pastor needs it and you need it. God does forgive you. Not because you bear fruit. He forgives you because of Christ on the cross for you. The more your eyes are on Christ, the more fruit your tree will produce, beautiful fruit. The less your eyes are on Christ, the less fruit you will produce. And so, as your pastor, the manure spreader here, I must always keep Jesus and His cross - His Gospel of forgiveness - in front of you. And yet, not I, but God does this for you, His precious trees. Amen.