



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

3rd Sunday in Lent: March 24, 2019

Sermon Title: "Growing In God's Garden"

Texts: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

As a young homeowner and gardener, I made lots of mistakes, mainly cutting down things I thought didn't belong in "my" garden. One of these was the mimosa tree. Mimosas produce sticky flowers that ooze totally non-helpful sap on everything, including cars. And after a couple years I never observed that tree produce anything of actual value. Certain that it was just taking up space that some better tree or plant could be using, like lilacs which I love, I cut it down. Or so I thought. But in truth, every year we after, at the back of our property, green shoots would come up and in God's view of the world that tree had a place. And it turns out that if you asked my daughter, Catherine, she'd tell you that those flowers on the mimosa were a beautiful vivid pink (her favorite color) and they looked just like ballerina tutus. And the hummingbirds loved them, and so did the butterflies and honey bees. And we all need those pollinators to live. My life with the mimosa tree is a small example of how I "grew" as a gardener. And God gave me the time to grow, even when I was busy trying to cut down that tree, and preoccupied with deciding what might be better.

It seems pretty innocuous, this growth process, when we are talking about a tree in the yard. But of course, Jesus is using this to get us to think about one another. Have you ever heard someone say that attending to another was a "waste of time"? Or that providing for a need was a "waste of money, or tax dollars?" Or that a person, by virtue of their age, or other factors was a "waste of space?" And we are all assessing each other. Part of our nature can be worrying about how we all fit into the grand scheme, or the pecking order of life. Who is better and who is worse? Jesus, look at THOSE people... In Jesus' day, many believed that bad things happened to bad people, that your situation in life was solely a result of being good or bad; sinner or righteous. And that people get what they do because they deserve it.

We can waste a lot of time and energy on this.

I could pick any one of a myriad of current events to highlight this, but lately in the news, we have heard about the college admissions scandal. Wealthy people paying excessive amounts of money to “game” the college admissions process at the best schools to ensure their children the best life possible. Believing that a degree from Harvard or Yale or Stanford will set them up for life. Is this wrong? Yes. Did they do it out of love? Probably. Will there be legal consequences? Probably. Are they the worst offenders ever? Not really.

Yet, as Pastor Schul noted recently, we discard and destroy, divide and demoralize often. Have you noticed that the college admissions story has taken on a life of its own as our news outlets have shifted from learning about an event, to feasting on the news and each new detail? Relishing in how the mighty have fallen and dissecting their lives while contemplating who is the worst offender? Does any of this feasting enrich our lives? No, in fact it robs us of hope, and kindles despair.

Do you hear behind our lessons and this news story, the anxieties? Our human condition is often a condition of anxiety. We long for what is exceptional, but stress about our inability to overcome life’s challenges and fret over our own mortality and legacy. Do we measure up? Will we succeed? And what do we do about these unresolved anxieties and longings?

Sometimes we try to shore ourselves up at the expense of others. We try to decide who is worth it. Cutting someone else down may offer a short term boost. Maybe we hoard our resources to stave off uncertainty about the future. Or seek to solidify our social standing, even if it means painting someone else in a bad light, as we imagine stability in our identity- in work, political party, social circle, or nation. “Jesus, what about those Galileans?”

Why don’t Jesus’ listeners remember our Isaiah passage? Are they worse God followers than us? Not a chance. I bet we forget the God of Isaiah too. God calling, “Come, come...” Don’t worry about not having the right things. Why spend your money on what won’t fill you? Why spend your energy on what will not satisfy you?... Listen, incline your ear this way (not that way). Come, listen so you may live. My promise to love you is everlasting.”

Does that sound like God looking for a reason to cut us down?

Jesus clearly says no and instead speaks of repentance and Isaiah says, “let the wicked and unrighteous return and God will have mercy and pardon.” And to all of us- “Seek the Lord. “

It might seem like just seeking the Lord and listening can’t be enough. But God’s not trying to figure out if God will love us. God’s waiting for us to remember how much God already does.

As I hear these words I imagine my spiritual director, who is an older retired nun. Hildegard is a grandmotherly sort, the kind of person that if I was a child, I would climb right up on her lap. She is usually knitting and wearing lace she has made, beckoning me to come with a generous smile, and that look of wisdom that time gives. When I go to meet with her, she invites me to “come and sit down.” And she listens to me, and then she pokes around my words for what is in my heart. And sometimes I proceed to tell her more of my ideas and perceptions about people and situations as she keeps poking around and asking what my heart is saying. And often it happens that something buried deep suddenly breaks open like rock bound soil finally breaks open.

And I know that when this happens, whether in her presence or even days later, now the roots of my soul can grow more deeply, and my capacity for God’s vision will grow too. God’s digging around in my heart isn’t always easy but it does help me grow.

So often in life we focus upon cutting down. We focus upon time- we’ll give someone we see unfavorably a week, maybe a year, but then- CUT!

But how about God?

God gives us time to grow in the garden. Wait, give it more time, let me dig around and tend this tree. It might still bear fruit. Wouldn’t you want to be given the chance to grow, to live, thrive even?

In this parable, imagine you are that sketchy fig tree. So am I. Each of us, a tree. And the garden is not OURS, it is God’s.

Thank God that God’s ways and thoughts are not ours. That God continually beckons us to grow away from our thoughts and ways to God’s.

To repent and live.

Repentance in this sense is the constant, patient growing in love, breaking open ourselves to the work of the Spirit, and turning away from our “selves” to embrace the gift of God’s salvation. And this call to repentance is not so much a demand, but an invitation to come, listen and live.

Why would we ever grow away from such love?