

If It Bears Fruit
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Isaiah 55:1-9

¹ Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
³ Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
⁴ See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.
⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
⁷ let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9

1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?’ ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’
6 Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” ⁸He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year,

well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

It was reported by Benjamin Franklin himself that he undertook improvement in thirteen virtues as a way to come closer to moral perfection. Each week he would focus on one particular virtue, starting over on the list after thirteen weeks. He kept a log, which he completed each morning for the day before, recording how many times he slipped up in any virtuous area, with the aim of having a mark-free day. His chosen virtues, along with guiding words for following them, were:

Temperance: Eat not to dullness. Drink not to elevation.

Silence: Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversation.

Order: Let all your things have their places. Let each part of your business have its time.

Resolution: Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve.

Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself: i.e., Waste nothing.

Industry: Lose no time. Be always employed in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary actions.

Sincerity: Use no hurtful deceit. Think innocently and justly; and if you speak, speak accordingly.

Justice: Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

Moderation: Avoid extremes. Forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

Cleanliness: Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.

Tranquility: Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.

Chastity: Rarely use venery but for health or offspring; never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.

Humility: Imitate Jesus and Socrates.¹

Benjamin Franklin knew he was far more likely to succeed at any of these if there was an end date in mind, thus the focus of one per week. It's the same reason it is easier to stick to a diet if its goal is an upcoming event or to an exercise plan if there is a measurable change sought. On the reverse, it's the same reason there are support groups for people suffering chronic illness or struggling against addictions, for which there is no set end date. We, as humans, find it difficult to endure the challenging stuff for an undetermined amount of time.

This was not news to the author of our reading in Isaiah, nor to Jesus. We read in Isaiah, “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.” Jesus, through Luke’s retelling, speaks of giving a fig tree one more year to produce fruit. Luke’s style is very much driven by time, as we read repeatedly phrases like “and now,” “in those days,” “one day,” “soon,” “at that same hour,” and “just then.” There was a sense of urgency in his writing, an urgency reflecting what he perceived to be the imminent return of Christ. Luke captures this imminence in a later story about another fig tree: “Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also when you see these things taking

¹ http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/pop_virtues_list.html

place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.”²

We, those of us living 2,000 years later, know that this must not have been literal and so we have lost that sense of urgency, that sense of a set end date. And so, aimlessly, we spend our money for that which is not bread and we labor for that which does not satisfy. If we are honest with ourselves, if we knew that we had 365 days left, we would probably calculate what we believed to be the minimum days necessary to still seem like we had put in enough effort. Not to mention, we don't have a sense that one day God will not be near – after all, Jesus told us of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the absence of his physical presence and we, those of us who stand in pulpits, encourage people to look for God every day in big and small places and ways, assured that God is here. Add to that our earnest belief, as believers, that Jesus died so that our sins might be forgiven and so that we might be reconciled to God in spite of ourselves and we have a tendency to favor the easy route.

Seldom, though, is God's way the easier one. If you have ever tended a garden, you know that to dig around a tree's roots and then to add manure, even for a day, is a great deal of hard, yet careful, work. There are many ways to look at this parable of the fig tree – the one I favor places God in the role of the man who owns the vineyard, the gardener as us, and the fig tree as our lives of faith, both individually and as the body of Christ. We are challenged, then, by the honest question: “Why should it be wasting the soil?” Are our lives of faith merely dormant? Have we even asked ourselves such a question lately? When was the last time we listened carefully to God, that we inclined our ears?

Lent gives us a very concrete amount of time, as Ben Franklin favored, to focus ourselves on listening for God, to focus on inclining toward God. I would say we take our faith in baby steps, thinking of the length of a small one's steps, but as I thought about it, I think we do take our faith in baby steps, just in a different way. If you've watched Joe Joe lately, he gets going at full speed and then pauses, takes a rest, and starts back up at full speed. Well, Lent is like one of those full speed bursts. It is a finite time to dig and fertilize; then we take a break, mop our brows, and drink the refreshing waters of Easter.

Lent is a growing season. If we return to the garden, we know that regular attention produces the best fruits at the end of a season. In these past two weeks, by way of the scriptures, I've encouraged you to humbly look at ways in which you could better follow Christ and to acknowledge your troubles and give them to God. This week, the scriptures encourage us to take our faith seriously, to strive in our faith as if we knew when Jesus would return, as if there is little time to get much done. The season of Lent has more weeks to it yet; maybe you haven't given anything up or taken on anything to get closer

² Luke 21:29-32

to God up to this point. Would you consider it if you faced the challenge a week at a time, as Ben Franklin did?

Most mornings Franklin had to make marks in his log in areas where he fell short of his goals, but he improved the more he practiced, growing toward, what he called, moral perfection. Perhaps you've avoided looking for ways to be better in favor of the ease of life as it is; perhaps you've avoided giving God your troubles in favor of their familiar comfort. Perhaps the idea of behaving as if your judgment awaits you any day is too much in favor of resting on God's forgiveness. But what if? What if you took these challenges on a week at a time? Even a day at a time? How much fruit might your life bear? Jesus' parable wasn't told to scare people into improving but to prompt the question, "What are you waiting for?" There's nothing to lose and everything to gain. Remember the words from Isaiah: "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Stir within us, O Lord, so that we might nurture our faith this day and evermore, we pray.
Amen.