

"Jesus the Arborist"  
Lent Three March 7, 2010  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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Some of you may remember our dog, Buffy. She was a yellow lab/beagle mix who died four years ago at the age of thirteen. I adopted her from a shelter in Maryland the year before I moved to Illinois. She was two and a half and she was a mess. The shelter staff believed she had been with four families before I adopted her. Her history probably included abuse, neglect, and cruelty. I didn't know the results of this until she settled in with me and my dog Murphy.

She barked frantically, non-stop, during thunderstorms and fireworks. If you tried to take a hold of her collar she would whip her head around and grab your wrist with her jaw. If you reached out your foot to pet her she would bite your foot so I am guessing she was kicked often. She guarded her food with a fierceness that led me to believe she had to fight for every scrap she ate. If she had a chew toy or a bone you never got too close or she would feel threatened and try to bite. On top of all that she wasn't easy to housebreak and just when I thought she had it all figured out- I would find a puddle, or worse, in the house.

When I was called to move out here I wasn't even sure I could bring her along. I didn't know if I could deal with all of her neuroses on top of my own during such a stressful time. But she made the move and turned into one of the sweetest dogs you could want. It was a long process and there were times that I didn't think she would ever stop biting or going to the bathroom in the house. She never did stop barking at thunderstorms. And sometimes I ran out of patience with her. But she did finally get to the point where you could rub her belly with your foot or take a hold of her collar without fear. She and Murphy were great companions to each other and to me and later, to Marty as well.

Buffy forced me to be patient and to expect the best. When I thought I couldn't handle her anymore I would think about the life she lived before I found her and my heart would soften. It wasn't her fault she was mistreated. She was just reacting in the only way she knew how. She had learned to defend herself at a young age. When she finally realized she was safe in my house and that she could trust me, good behavior followed. She was a good dog.

For some reason Buffy came to mind this week as I was studying the story about the fig tree. This parable from Jesus is all about patience, second chances, and proper care. But let's start at the beginning. I told you last week that the lectionary texts from Luke for the season of Lent seem a bit strange. Some are sad, some are ominous and others are just confusing.

Jesus is on a journey- he is traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem and we know what awaits him there- the cross. Along the way he is trying to impart as much wisdom as he can to the crowds and especially to his disciples. Keep in mind that the Gospel of Luke is a gospel of inclusion- God has enough love for everyone. Jesus' message through Luke's pen is this: all are welcome to be a part of God's family.

In this text a question is raised by the crowd about the connection between sin and suffering. Jesus gives two examples- a group of Galileans were offering sacrifices in the temple when they were massacred by Pilate's soldiers. Eighteen people were killed when a tower fell on them. His question is: were these people worse sinners than anyone else? Is that why they were killed? And his answer is no- they were killed because Pilate was evil and the tower was unstable. Contrary to the theology of the day, Jesus tells them that bad things happen to good

people too.

But he doesn't let it rest there. He uses these two stories as a call to repentance. You never know when death will come, he warned, so now is the time to get right with God. You don't know when or where or how you will die so turn back to God right now. He doesn't use death as a threat- saying if you don't repent you will go to hell. For Jesus repentance isn't about avoiding punishment. It is not a threat, but a promise. It is about a glorious relationship with God that will change your life and the world.

Then he tells a parable about a fig tree. Here is where we meet Jesus the Arborist. A landowner was looking over his vineyard one day and noticed a fig tree that refused to produce fruit. He had been watching this tree for three years and for three years it was barren. He was a businessman who was used to getting results so he told the gardener to cut the tree down. "If it isn't producing, it shouldn't waste soil," he declared.

The gardener had a better idea. "Let's give it some more time," he said. "I will give it extra care and special fertilizer. If it still doesn't offer any fruit in one year then I will cut it down." Don't you wish you knew what happened to that tree? But for Luke, that isn't the point. The point is offering more time, having patience and waiting for a new result. In the gardener's voice we hear urgency and hope- "one more year and then we'll see." "Let's give this hopeless case more time." Notice that the gardener doesn't just leave the tree on its own to wait out the year. He puts time and effort into preparing it for change. He does all he can to make sure the tree bears fruit. He aerates the soil, he spreads the richest manure he can find, he prunes the dead branches, and he probably talks to it too. And he expects change. He expects fruitfulness.

Here we find the crux of Luke's gospel- repentance. Luke talks about the urgent need for repentance more than any other New Testament writer. For Luke the good news of the gospel is the gift of repentance and forgiveness. Story after story in Luke tell of God's extravagant grace poured out on people who, in our eyes, don't deserve it.

The fig tree is condemned by the landowner, not because it is doing something bad, but because it is doing **nothing**. And therein lies Luke's message to us. Are you bearing fruit or just taking up space? The good news of the gospel is that Jesus accepts us as we are but doesn't leave us there. He loves us enough to tell us the truth about who we are and who we were created to be. He sees us as we are- fruitful or barren, and calls us to turn back to God.

Repentance isn't about feeling guilty or sorry for what we have done or haven't done. Repentance is a basic reorientation of our lives. It is turning from one way of thinking, acting, believing to another. It is a radical re-thinking about life. We can't turn **away** from something unless we have something to turn **toward**. Jesus offers us something to turn toward- a relationship with God.

*Repentance means more than being sorry. It means being different. (1)*

Writer Frederick Buechner tells us that "to repent is to come to your senses. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than to the future and saying, "Wow!" (2)

Repentance is an ongoing process. It is a lifestyle. One commentator suggests that repentance isn't a **fruit** problem, but a **root** problem. *It is the root of who we are. (3)*

The message of Jesus is clear- repentance leads to transformation. And that transformation will lead us to bear good fruit. Those who commit themselves to walking the journey with Jesus will soon realize that repentance is something we do every day. We keep turning around. We continually acknowledge our tendency to follow our own path instead of Jesus' path.

Theologian Brian McLaren reminds us that Jesus called people to repent because the kingdom of God is at hand. And if that is true we need to adjust our way of life and join in the joyful, painful mission of reconciliation right now. ASAP! (4)

This is our Lenten journey- a journey to transformation- made possible by true repentance; made possible by turning back to God each and every day.

Repentance means, above all, a constant, patient, growing in love. It means our willingness to open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in us and to embrace fully God's amazing gift of grace.

Lent is our invitation to look to the future and say, "Wow!"

It is a gracious reminder for us to ask ourselves:

Are we bearing fruit or just taking up space?                      Amen.

#### End Notes:

- 1- A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIANITY, Brian D. McLaren, Harper One. 2010. p. 77.
- 2- WISHFUL THINKING: A THEOLOGICAL ABC, Frederick Buechner, Harper and Row. 1973. p. 79
- 3- PREACHING LUKE'S GOSPEL, Richard Jensen.
- 4- McLaren, pg. 140.