

“If It Should Bear Fruit” (Luke 13:6-9)

Third Sunday in Lent, March 3rd, 2013

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Yesterday, you completed the 16th day of Lent and tomorrow you enter into the 17th day of the 40 days (remember don't count the Sundays). What are you doing as you live through these days? Hopefully, the answer is quite simple for you. You are doing what every Christian is called to do and what is here described in our Gospel text this morning in Luke 13:6-9: you are living in repentance. In fact, not only is this the rhythm of faith which our Lord Jesus has given to us to practice during Lent, but it is in fact the way of life we are called to know for our entire lives: repentance, repentance, repentance. Not just 40 days, or 40 weeks, or 40 months, or 40 years, but for as long as we live our Merciful God calls us to repentance.

It is in fact so important that it is the *only* way to cope with the terrible things that happen in this life. There is no other way in the respect that every *other* way in which we try to face these things leads to frustration and inadequate solutions. We need to live in repentance so that every natural disaster, every illness, every accident, and every cause for suffering and death is met with the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Repentance is what keeps us in Christ so that we would know God's answer to sin; God's answer to suffering; and God's answer to death. Jesus is that answer and in Him who took our sin upon Himself we are led back to the only proper response to our suffering today. For Christians like you, we reject the notion that suffering is

meaningless. And while it is true that suffering stems from sin which is chaotic and beyond analysis -- that is, certainly we aren't called to give meaning to its origin which is darkness -- we *are* in a position to see meaning in what God has done about it. We see meaning in that we are redeemed in our suffering. We see meaning in that it leads us to run to Jesus.

Jesus suffered so that suffering would not conquer us, but rather lead us back to the cross where Jesus conquered all sin and suffering. In Jesus our death is wrapped in His death, and to be wrapped into His death is to be wrapped into His resurrection (Romans 6:3-5). Not even death can destroy you Christian, because Jesus has given you the victory over it (1st Corinthians 15:57) since you are now through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion incorporated into the Risen Christ. In the meantime, as you await to know your glorified body which will never suffer again, nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39). Repentance is the act of getting back to this foundation. Repentance is to turn away from your hopelessness and to turn back to what God has done for you in Christ. Repentance is to verify and to confirm once again who you *are* in Christ.

Needless to say, therefore, there are few things more important than repentance in the Christian faith. This is what the account in Luke 13 is about. It is easy to misread Luke 13 when the owner (who represents our Father in heaven) comes to inspect the fig tree in his vineyard (the fig tree representing the Jews in Jerusalem -- remember last week our consideration of Christ mourning over Jerusalem, Luke 13:34 -- and the vineyard is all of Israel, His chosen nation). It is easy to misread, because of the initial reference to the

Father looking for fruit on the tree. This is why so many people misunderstand what repentance *is*. That is repentance is often led to focus on fruit, or the works of faith. That is to say, if you look at your own life and you feel that you are being productive in good works, etc., then you might very well conclude that you must be living in repentance, because after all true repentance produces “fruit”: the good things that come from the life of faith (like good thoughts, good works, good actions, good service, good prayer, good worship, good witness, etc.). But this is exactly what gets Christians into trouble. If you focus on the fruit, then you will neglect the rest of the tree and quite frankly, you will miss the single most important part of this parable: namely, the *vinedresser* who is caring for the tree. His name is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the vinedresser.

Let me break this down: If a Christian focuses on fruit that takes the form of good works, then the Christian will inevitably become focused on the law of God which commands good works (and prohibits sin of course). But remember his: the law is always law. The law always accuses. If you focus on law (even as a Christian), then you will try also to be motivated and empowered by it. But the law can't do any of these things. The law cannot motivate you to do good. Instead, the law condemns you, because you haven't. The law cannot inspire to do good. Instead, you see through the law your failure. The law cannot drive you to do good, because even if you think it drives you, you do it for the wrong reasons...you do it because by it you think you are good by what you are doing (which is another way of denying the Gospel), or you do it because you believe you are not good (which means you live the so-called “Christian life” in fear and anxiety) and you do what you do so that God will not punish you (which means that once again you are

missing the Gospel). Finally, the law cannot empower you. In fact, it always accuses you and shows you the weakness of your flesh. So again, this parable of the fig tree and the vinedresser is not given to you so that you would focus on your fruit, or good works. Please understand: I am not saying that good works are not necessary in the life of the Christian. They most certainly are, ***but they are not your focus. True good works – good fruit – comes rather when your focus, your faith, your love is on the vinedresser, the Lord Jesus Christ!***

When I think back to my childhood, I really don't think about the work, but I think about a wonderful family. At the same time, we were raised to know hard work. We did not consider it abusive or a form of slave labor, but it was normal. It was the way we contributed to the needs of the overall family. Everyone worked hard and we saved money wherever we could. So as a boy at about age 10, I got to do just about everything: cleaned furniture, tiles, cabinets, took out the trash, fed the dogs, picked up after the dogs, frequently washed dishes (there was no such thing as “dishwasher” without two legs and two arms), mopped floors, vacuumed carpets and drapes, cleaned windows, cleaned vents, mowed lawns, pulled weeds, trimmed bushes, painted fences, cleaned out the swamp cooler on the roof and installed new filters, dugged out lawns and installed new ones, cut down trees and pulled out the roots, and we did not hire anyone to paint our house, we painted our own house when it needed to be painted. But I've got to tell you that all of seemed perfectly normal. It was all good and for the most part (though not always), I just knew that that was just the way it was. Why? Because my parents gave me everything I needed: they gave me a roof over my head, great food every day, all the clothes and shoes I needed (including athletic equipment, uniforms and shoes I

did not need but go anyway), they gave me all the comforts of home, and provided everything I needed for school and all of the many extracurricular activities I engaged in. That is to say, while I certainly had to put my mind to any given task that I was busy doing, I was not motivated to do the chores because of the chores; but I was motivated by my parents. Even when that motivation required their laying down the law, what I realize is that I didn't want to disappoint them because they were indeed (and my mom still is) very loving parents. I belonged to this family and I was loved and provided for. My motivation, therefore, was not primarily about the work itself, but for the family behind the work.

But one of my favorite jobs and I think it was because it meant that I had to be around our dogs out in the backyard was to take care of our two large orange trees and our one large grapefruit tree. This was a sheer delight for me as a kid. I got to take care of our fruit trees. I loved those trees. In fact – and of course this will certify that your pastor was somewhat of a weird kid, and that's ok as I'm still a little weird, just ask my children – I would love to climb up into the trees, and play with the bees that were pollinating the trees. Because the trees were my friends, so were the bees. I would collect the bees with my hands – children do not attempt to do this at home – and put them into a jar and then let them out again. But then I'd climb down and also take care of the trees. I would pull out "suckers" on the trunk, and also maintain the trenches around the trunk and then of course I would fill the trenches with water to keep the trees alive. In all of this, God let me keep our trees alive. It was a great job and when I did it right, those trees would produce the most amazing oranges and grapefruits. I could eat those oranges all day long.

In the meantime, the tree never, ever took care of itself. At night, the tree did not become animated and walk around the yard watering itself. The tree could only be a tree, and it could not bear fruit unless someone took care of it.

You dear Christian according to this parable in Luke 13 are a tree. Again, the parable refers directly to the Jews in Jerusalem, but it has universal application to the modern-day children of Abraham, the people of God who have faith in Christ. You are those people and you are also the trees of God. God comes checking your fruit. And the initial reaction is that we are lacking. We know our sin and the good works that we would do, we do not do; and the bad things we do not want to do are the things we do (Romans 7). We are alarmed, because we don't produce fruit the way we ought to. And every time we try and start to focus on the fruit itself, we get even more frustrated because trees by themselves can't produce fruit. They need someone to take care of them!

Jesus is the one who takes care of you. He loves you. You are His favorite tree. He loves everything about you and He is meticulous about His care for you. ***He was both thorough and meticulous when He prayed for you, lived for you, died for you and rose for you; He is through and meticulous now as He waters you through Holy Baptism and keeps you well-nourished through Holy Communion.*** Notice the dialog between the Father and the Son and note especially what the Son says that He is going to do with the tree: ***"And [the Father] said to the vinedresser [the Son], 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he***

answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' (Luke 13:7-9)

Note by the way, that both the Father and the Son is merciful in that He pleads on your behalf, that you would be given more time to be cared for by Him and be led to repentance and that repentance recognizes that you are not in charge of the fruit, but He is. I'll say a little more on this in a second. But the Father is merciful as well, because He receives the pleading of His son and He accepts it. He gives you more time, because He wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1st Timothy 2:5). The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who facilitates this work in your life, are all gathered around taking care of you, the tree of God, the child of God who is cared for and nourished by God.

Still, did you notice that the Lord says that when He digs around you, that He will put on "manure"? Well, there's an appetizing thought! But that manure is absolutely essential. When I was taking care of those orange trees and that grape-fruit tree, part and parcel of that job was the manure (don't worry, I won't go into details). But when the Lord takes care of you this is what He does: He digs, He applies manure, and He waters. We can reduce what He does to two things: (1) He takes care of us in such a way that we (for our own good) experience unpleasant things; and (2) He takes care of us in such a way that we experience the sweetest things and the greatest healing. In other words, He takes care of us through His Law and His Gospel.

The manure, the trimming/pruning and the digging represent the Law. When the Law is applied to your life, you experience the first of two parts of repentance. The Law is designed to cut to the heart and make you smell your sin. If you do not feel the digging, the convicting work of the Holy Spirit; if you do not smell your sins and feel the appropriate response which is contrition (sorrow for your sin), then you will never experience the first-part of repentance which is to confess your sin to God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the hard work (but it is God's work in you), it means we experience sorrow and the terrors of conscience...it is the thoroughly stinky and unpleasantly smelling part of repentance. This is not only normal, but essential.

But after the work of the Law, after the manure has been applied, the second part of the two parts of repentance is our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, it is true that as Christians we know sorrow, we know humility, we know contrition, but dear Christian don't ever stop there. If you stop there then you will only know HALF of what repentance is. The other half, that crucial half is what the Gospel does: the Gospel saves! You are forgiven ALL your sin. So, that second half of repentance is faith in Jesus Christ and the ensuing joy of the Lord. Come what may in life, nothing can take you away from the love of Christ! You are made into a tree that bears fruit, and the real amazing part is that you're not focused on the fruit, but you are overjoyed by the Vinedresser who has saved your life and given you life!

You are overjoyed that this Savior serves you and serves you and serves you. He shed His blood for you to cover your sins (you were washed in His blood); He also watered you in Baptism so that you

would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are united to Him; and He continues to feed you in Holy Communion so that life would run through your body by the body and blood of Christ given and shed for you!

Under this kind of care from the Vinedresser, good fruit is produced. He digs, He prunes, He applies the manure, He waters...and then the tree is strong, and the tree bears fruit. It is just what you do, and because this is just what you do, you do not focus on law that says, "you must!" but rather you delight in Jesus who says, "you are!" You are His new creation, His living tree, bearing fruit that comes from the work of the Vinedresser Jesus Christ.