

A WASTE OF GOOD SOIL

Luke 13.6-9

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Isaiah 55.1-7 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

All you who are thirsty,
come to the water!

You who have no money,
come, buy food and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk,
without money and without price!

Why spend your money for what is not bread,
your wages for what does not satisfy?

Heed me, and you will eat well,
you will delight in rich fare;

bend your ear and come to me,
listen, that you may have life:

I will make an everlasting covenant with you –
in fulfillment of the blessings promised to David.

See, I have made you to be a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander of the nations.

See, you will summon nations you never knew;
and nations that never knew you will come rushing to you –
for the sake of God, the Holy One of Israel,
who will glorify you.

Seek me, while I may still be found,
call upon me while I am near!

Let the corrupt abandon their ways,
the evil their thoughts.

Let them return to me, and I will have mercy on them;
return to me, for I will freely pardon.

Luke 13.6-9 (NRSV)

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.” ’

Sermon

“Have mercy on us and deliver us from all our sins.”

Let me ask you this morning: Do you think it’s a sin to be wasteful?

No doubt, some of you grew up with someone telling you to “eat your peas; there are children starving in Africa.” Perhaps you offered to send them if only someone could give you their address.

Being wasteful might not be exactly a sin. But it wasn’t a good thing.

I wonder if you could do a generational study based on the ethics of waste.

My grandparents lived through the Great Depression so, for them, it was pretty much a sin to waste anything. Patrick tells the story of his grandmother who washed out and saved all the TV dinner trays for some future use. There were hundreds of them. Of course there is a difference between not wasting things and hoarding them but the generation of the Great Depression made a virtue out of not wasting things.

My parents still had some of that ethic in them but the culture of their generation and mine seemed to manufacture more and more intentional waste. The motto of my generation seems to have been “abandon and buy new.” We are the generation of landfills and floating islands of garbage at sea and 40% of our food wasted.

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, the average American family spends over \$2,000 every year on food they do not eat. And someone is making millions of dollars managing all that waste. Waste Management Corporation last year had sales of over \$12 billion.

We are now entering a generation that is beginning to see what all that waste is doing to us and to our planet. It’s a sin, really – a sin against

the Earth, a sin against our children and grandchildren, a sin against the One who, as we sing, “sustains and preserves all creation.”

And if this is sin, there are some pretty practical forms of repentance – “repentance” meaning not just being sorry but actually changing our ways. Repentance for the sin of waste is: Reduce. Re-use. Re-cycle.

If waste is a sin because of what it is doing to our planet and to each other and to ourselves, there is a very practical form of repentance: Reduce. Re-use. Re-cycle.

I’ve been thinking about all this because the lessons for this morning seem to be about waste.

Isaiah asks: “Why do you waste your money – your resources – on things that don’t satisfy?” Or as Pastor Emily Heath asks: Why do you waste your resources on things that cannot love you back?

In the parable Jesus tells in Luke 13, a landowner planted a fig tree three years ago and it still isn’t producing any fruit. “Cut it down!” he says, “Why should it be *wasting* the soil?” But the gardener intercedes and says, “I’ll work on it and, if it bears fruit next year, then good; and, if not, you can cut it down then.”

Why waste good soil on a tree that isn’t producing anything?

In the story, we are led to believe that the only way to know if soil has been wasted or, for that matter, if the gardener’s efforts have been wasted is if the tree produces some kind of fruit.

And this is where this story gets a little tricky for me. Because we don’t always get to see the “fruit of our labors.” In fact rarely do we get to see the real impact of what our efforts and our energy and our lives have produced. Sometimes I think the only people who get to see even a glimmer of that impact are the people at our funerals.

There are older people in my life who have had a huge positive impact on me whose own children are a disappointment to them. I wonder how they would read a story like this.

Or people who have given their lives to work for peace or therapists who have worked with the most chronically ill or service providers who face the challenges of what's now called the "revolving door of homelessness." What are they supposed to make of this story if they don't see a whole lot of fruit?

Here's my question: If the gardener does all this work and expends all this energy and there is no fruit, did she waste her time?

I am often drawn back to that poem written in memory of Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran Archbishop who was assassinated by right-wing militia while he was saying Mass in the small chapel of a cancer hospital. He was killed because of his work for justice on behalf of poor people in his country. And a fellow Bishop from Saginaw Michigan wrote a poem that includes these words:

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work ...
This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one
day will grow. We water the seeds already planted
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities ...*

We may never see the end results ...

Even if you do have some vision of what you hope your life will produce, you may not actually get there.

The last sermon Dr. King ever preached was on April 3rd, 1968. It was the night before he was assassinated and it is reported that he confessed privately that he was depressed; he felt like a failure. But he did what preachers do. He went to the pulpit and he said:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And God allowed me to go up the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

And that was it. The next day Dr. King was gone. Was he a failure? Was he wasting his time because he never got to live in that vision of promised land he had for all of us?

Was Oscar Romero wasting his time because his ministry never produced the hope and the justice he had been working for? Things are still horrible in El Salvador and our nation is partly responsible for that.

And I suspect these are not just questions of Archbishop Romero or Dr. King. They are questions for us as well. If we don't see the fruit we hope to see – the fruit we work to produce – are we wasting our time?

It's true. Sometimes I go home on a Sunday afternoon and I wonder if I'm just wasting my time. Or worse, am I just wasting your time? How would I know if I can't really put my finger on anything that looks like the produce we are supposed to be producing?

I find myself identifying with gardener in Jesus' parable. Even without a guarantee that there will be fruit, she does what gardeners do.

She says she will dig – which I know from personal experience both literally and metaphorically is hard work. Breaking up those hard surfaces of our lives that have been compacted by fear and self-preservation can be miserable work. Someone asked me last Sunday what it would mean for us to “come out deeper.” And I said, at the very least, it means listening to the people who make us uncomfortable.

It can take a lot of digging to break through the crust we create for ourselves so that sunlight and water and nutrients can get down into our roots and can feed our souls.

And once that’s done, the gardener is going to “fertilize.” And the NRSV doesn’t pull any punches about what that means. She is going to work manure into that soil.

Being a kid who grew up in farm country, I am reminded of those late spring days driving through the great central farmlands of Michigan with windows rolled down. And what you smelled for miles was fertilizer.

So when I find myself thinking that my ‘life stinks’ perhaps it does. And maybe it’s just fertilizer.

And the gardener does all this because of the most important thing of all – she is cultivating a second chance. The gardeners in our lives are the people who cultivate in us another chance when we think we have run out of them. It’s true that we may squander it. We may miss it. We may even refuse it. But, with no guarantee of fruit, that’s what gardeners do.

I come back to Dr. King again.

When our most tireless efforts fail to stop the surging sweep of oppression ... When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment ... we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance.

We need a gardener.

I have been thinking about the gardeners in my life. There have been a lot of them. And one of them is someone many of you know. You have heard me say how important Craig Darling has been in my life. He is one of those gardeners.

When I met Craig almost 30 years ago and my life was pretty much a mess, he kept digging at me. He tried to break up that veneer I had created for myself out of piety and the self-preservation that had crusted over my heart from being hurt just one too many times. He kept digging. And digging. And digging until my heart started to soften and my mind began to open up.

And then it was time for some fertilizer. Craig was good at fertilizer. He threw all kinds of things at me to see what would help me grow. There was always something new he thought would be good for me. And sometimes I would just find myself saying, “Oh, Craig, give it a rest.”

But Craig stayed at it because he knew what it was he was doing. He was cultivating in me the possibility of another chance. I know he has done that for some of you too. I’m here today not because I believed I would ever be a pastor again. I’m here because Craig believed something about me that I didn’t believe about myself.

Craig had no guarantee what all that effort would produce. But he is a gardener and that’s what gardeners do – they dig and they fertilize and they cultivate another chance.

And the last thing I would want, is that at any point, Craig would have thought that he was wasting his time.

The only sin, if there is one, is if I live like all that love and energy and hard work were wasted on me.

That's the final question, I think, of this little parable this morning. Gardeners are at work. And has all their love and energy and hope been wasted on us?

I hope the legacy of our Baptist ancestors hasn't been wasted on us – the legacy of freedom; the legacy of standing up against theocracy; the commitment to not let God be an excuse to oppress and exploit people. I hope the witness of people like Oscar Romero has not been wasted on us.

I hope the vision of Dr. King hasn't been wasted on us.

When Dr. King preached that last sermon he talked about being glad he got to see people being willing to go to jail for justice. "We would just go in the paddy wagon," he says, "singing 'We Shall Overcome.'"

So we are going to sing that this morning and I am going to invite you to do so as a commitment that all the love and all of that vision for justice and peace has not been wasted on us.

And today, if you hear some gardener's voice, digging around in your heart, don't tense up; don't close down; don't freeze out that voice; and even if you feel your heart breaking open a little, it's alright. That's how the light gets in. That's how the love gets out.

There are gardeners at work. So, today, whatever you do, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

Notes

Information about the alarming waste of food in the U.S. can be found on the websites of the Natural Resources Defense Council (www.nrdc.org/food/waste) and Food Rescue (www.foodrescue.net). Pastor Emily C. Heath is the senior pastor of the Congregational Church in Exeter, NH and her article about wasting our resources on the things that cannot love us back is in the February 17, 2016 issue of *Christian Century*. The memorial poem honoring Oscar Romero by Bishop Ken Untener can be found online at www.journeywithjesus.net. The final sermon by Dr. King is included in a collection, *I Have a Dream* edited by James M. Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), see pp. 193-203, especially pp.203 & 197. The sermon that includes "another chance" is "A tough mind and a tender heart," in the collection of sermon, *Strength to Love*, (Fortress Press, 1963), p.20. Pastor Craig Darling is now retired as Pastor of Vocation and Call at SFBC and is President Emeritus of Companis.