

This passage is about two things that are essential to Luke's Gospel: being repentant and bearing fruit. These central themes are present throughout the gospel come with consequences

Sometimes life gives us natural consequences of our actions. It can be as simple as not paying attention and dropping our phone, cracking the screen, and going to Verizon for a new phone. It can be as serious as a shrinking church when members are focused on the wrong thing. his passage is truly about what we do with the moments of crossroads in our lives. These difficult realizations certainly catalyze our lives. At this moment, when Jesus speaks, he is speaking to the church a whole to us, plural, the communal body of Christ.

Perfectly bluntly (and I am a northern girl, so I really can be blunt), he is telling his followers that they need to change their ways or their actions will lead to destruction. In fact, I think he uses a rather pastoral image with the fig tree.

Jesus' message is as true today as it was when he spoke to those present. Jesus, reflects the hard truth to that: yes, parts of the church are dying.¹ Let me be more specific: What needs to die in the church will die; what needs to bear fruit in the church will bear fruit.

In order for something to bear fruit, it must receive the proper nutrients, the difficult, grosse work of manure. It must be tended and given proper time, sometimes more time that is thought. The nitty, gritty, difficult, bold answer is, in order for the church at large or St. Dunstan's specifically to bear fruit, we have to work hard. There is just no way around it. What bears fruit - lives.

We have seen this idea of fruit bearing throughout the Gospel of Luke. Remember, John the Baptist told the crowd, "John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." The image of needing to give fruits worthy of this repentance is plain: in order to receive Christ we must examine our hearts, challenging thoughts that may be to do, we must examine them. That is true collectively as well as individually.

Later, in Luke 6:43-45, Jesus says that good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit and in the parable of the sower, Jesus says that those with good hearts produce fruit.² I have seen so many good hearts at St. Dunstan's from the moment I arrived. There is a great deal of good fruit in our ministries and from our ministries. Friends, I want us to continue to bear the good fruit. Our parable today is more merciful, because a tree bearing no fruit - neither good nor bad, gets a reprieve.

In this story, Jesus is clearly the gardener.³ He advocates for mercy. He does the hard work. Now, you probably know where I am going with this, we as Christians promise to try and emulate Christ. We must take our lessons today, and be the gardener for our church.

For example, we have a workday coming up on April 2; signup to come and spiffy up our church. Another way, come to Holy Smokes and set up a tent so that our community can feel welcomed at our church. In fact, just take a few Moo cards, those credit card size business cards in the back and give them to friends so they can learn about our events and begin or deepen a walk with Christ.

¹ For more on this, please see. Doyle, A. (2022). Address to Council. <https://youtu.be/H0mofNmEahk>

² Luke 8:4-15. This entire passage references the idea from Williams, J.L. (2022) <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-5>

³ Wright, N.T. (2001). *Luke for Everyone*. London: SPCK.

To thrive as a church, what we need to do is simple: we must repent. That literally means that we need to turn in a different direction.⁴ The parable Jesus tells is apt, however, the difference between us and a fig tree is clear. We have the power to choose.

So, let's choose to be the gardener and tend the church,⁵ finding the parts that can bear fruit and giving them nurturing power. Friends, notice that I am using the plural, metanoēō, is you, but it is plural;

The King James version translates the passage stronger, "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."⁶ As such, we all must repent, change course when necessary, together so we all can bear this good fruit.

Lent is a time to reform our minds so that we, as a church, can better see God's kingdom and bring it to others rather than continuing to bear bad fruit. There are new programs in our church and ones that might not work anymore. Our role as gardeners is to tend the church as best we can and change our ways to continue pointing to Christ.

Time for mercy - time for death

It is time for hard work. The reason we need solid Christian leadership in the church is that the work of repentance must be done consistently.⁷ We have to look at our lives individually, of course, however, this passage is speaking to a crowd. I am inclined to think that means, we as a church need to do consistent repentance, tending of our church turning our ways. We, as a church, have been given mercy. The vineyard owner could have easily chopped the tree down.

Yet, there was an intermediary. In the same way, when we see something in the church that is not quite working; we as a church must work together to help that ministry bear fruit to reflect Christ. If in time, that ministry is not bearing fruit, it must be pruned.

Repentance, like bearing fruit, is another theme throughout Luke's Gospel. Think of the parable of the prodigal son,⁸ where the younger son repents and the Older son, well, has a pity party. This theme of repentance continues today with the fig tree where the fig tree receives mercy. Where those who are gathered are encouraged to change their collective ways so that all of them may follow Christ's path.

Our scripture passage tells us the best way to do that: to focus on the future rather than dwelling on the past.⁹ Some ministries have already been cut and are unlikely to return due to the

⁴ Thomas, D. (2022). <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3348>

⁵ Williams, J.L. (2022)

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-5>

⁶ Luke 13:3 King James Version.

⁷ Doyle, A. (2019). *Hitchhiking the Word*. <http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com/search?q=Lent+3C>

⁸ Luke 15:17-19 Edwards, J.R. (2015). *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke*. Nottingham: Apollos. "Like the man who should settle with his accuser before it is too late (12:58), the owner creates a window of opportunity to bear fruit. In the olive tree illustration of Rom 11:22 Paul speaks of the "goodness and severity" of God, precisely the themes of this parable. The parable declares the owner's heart and resolve, but not the tree's response. Like Simon the Pharisee (7:50) or the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son (15:32), the question is left open whether there will be "fruit in keeping with repentance" (3:8)." I also lift up to you, Fr. Roman's blog where I get the image of the older son pouting. <https://saintdunstons.org/fr-romans-blog/the-parables-of-luke-15-part-6-the-father-and-the-two-lost-sons-luke-151-3-11-24-and-25-32/>

⁹ Williams, J.L. (2022)

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-5>

current need for them. They are no longer effective. Some ministries must be changed so that the message of uniting all people with God's love can be understood. It is a moving target, and it takes a lot of time.

Our time has come to do the hard work. We, as a church, must change our ways so that we bear good fruit. Today, on the third Sunday of Lent, we must look in our hearts and ensure they are turning toward God. We must look at our families and know they are full of Christ's love. Then, as a church family, we together must be the gardeners of the church ensuring each ministry reflects a uniting of God's love through Christ. When we do this, what is meant to thrive in the church, will absolutely flourish. Amen.