

“Putting on Manure”

Luke 13:1-9

A prosperous young Wall Street broker met, fell in love with, and was frequently seen escorting about town a rising actress of gentility and dignity. He wanted to marry her, but being a cautious man he decided that before proposing matrimony he should have a private investigating agency check her background and present activities. After all, he reminded himself, I have both a growing fortune and a reputation to protect against a marital misadventure. The Wall Streeter requested that the agency was not to reveal to the investigator the identity of the client requesting a report on the actress.

In due time the investigator's report was sent to the broker. It said that the actress had an unblemished past and a spotless reputation, and that "her friends and associates were of the best repute. "The only shadow", added the report, "is that currently she is often seen around town in the company of a young broker of dubious business practices and principles." Putting on manure.

Every so often, each of us needs to have the old hardened ground around us dug up and replaced with smelly, fertile manure. Especially when we get to the point that we are so aloof, so arrogant, so self-centered that we can no longer see our own shortcomings but can only see the faults of the people around us. We become a self-serving tree that sucks up all the nutrients and energy from the immediate environment for our own personal growth while bearing no fruit for those around us to benefit from.

God, the impatient father of the O.T. says, "Lo, these 3 years I have come seeking fruit

on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?" And Jesus answers him, "Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Jesus is not so quick to give up on us. Even when we have turned away from God and have not been bearing fruit for a long time, Jesus wants to continue to work with us, to dig up the old dirt and replace it with new, to change us into fruit-bearing trees. But even Jesus confesses that there will be those of us whom will not chance, those of us who will never bear fruit, no matter how many times the manure is put on. In the end, these fruitless and self-serving trees will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

In this text, in verse 3 and verse 5, Jesus finds it necessary to tell his listeners twice how to become fruit-bearing trees. He repeats himself twice to make sure we know what will happen to us when he puts on the manure. You will either repent or you will perish. You will either become a fruit bearing tree or you will be cut down.

The message of John the Baptist and now the message of Jesus is very clear. The repentant attitude is required now. Jesus' theme song throughout the gospels is: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." When Jesus sent out the 12 disciples it was not enough that they cast out demons and heal the sick. They must preach that people should repent. That people should step back, look at themselves, recognize their sins, ask for forgiveness, and begin a new way.

And of course, the modern day disciple is called to preach that same message. But as we all know "repentance" is not an "in" word today. Putting on manure is not the comfortable thing to do.

We have changed the words of Jesus, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," to mean, "Relax, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

A study was recently completed that was based on the responses of more than 2,000 church members from all denominations in Minnesota. The study revealed that 28% of the Christians interviewed believe humans are inherently good. This optimistic attitude is reflected in these words by one of those responding. "The day I die, I should only have to look up at my Master and say, 'Take me'. I should not have to say, 'Forgive me – I'm not saying that I'm perfect but I have led a life that I don't have to be ashamed of."

When I first read this study, it was difficult for me to understand how people could talk in such glowing terms about themselves. But then I got to thinking, it's always been that way. Jesus was challenging the piety, comfort, and self-righteousness of the self-proclaimed religious of his day. Jesus knew that these were the very people with the most problems, the trees that were bearing no fruit and needed a healthy dose of manure.

Today, my experience has been that people who appear to be and say that they are self-confident and optimistic are the people with the most problems. They deny their sinfulness, deny their problems, keep it all stuffed inside so that a good impression, can be made on the outside. They say things like, "The day I die I should only have to look up at my Master and say, 'Take me.' I should not have to say, 'Forgive me.'"

In the face of all that has gone on in recent history; the World Wars, the holocaust, growing poverty, world hunger, nuclear arms; in the face of all this it is difficult for me to

understand how church going people do not see this life as out of step with God; do not see a need to say, "Forgive me." A need to put on manure.

Maybe it's not so difficult to understand. Maybe it's not so surprising Especially when we look in the Bible and see that our inability to repent has always been a weakness. In the first letter of John and at the beginning of our worship services we read, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

Saying that we have no sin must have also been prevalent in the early church. Sin has never been a popular subject. Especially my sin. At the heart of my sin and your sin is self-deception. We do deceive ourselves. We do have the tendency to set our selves on a pedestal. Most of us probably love ourselves and our opinions more than we think or admit.

When we repent, when we truly look at ourselves and ask forgiveness, we reorient our life. We at least temporarily change directions, when we recognize the evil power of the self-righteous spirit.

The great heros of the Bible were people who were enabled to take a good look at themselves and where they were going. People who were able to look beyond themselves. People who were able to serve their fellow humans because they saw the limitedness of serving themselves.

Moses was the example given to us in our Monday evening and Wednesday morning Bible study class in January. We can learn from his example of putting on manure.

The Hebrew people have been enslaved in Egypt for 400 years and pray for

freedom. In Exodus 2:23 the people cried out, and their appeal for rescue from their slavery rose up to God. First step. Recognize we are slaves and pray for deliverance.

Moses says to God, "But who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" Our first reaction is get someone else to do the job for us. Instead of taking action to make some changes in our lives, we want to relax.

God says to Moses, "Go and assemble the elders of Israel and tell them that God has appeared to you and has said, 'I am resolved to bring you out of your misery in Egypt.'"

Second step. Assemble and meet with the people. Challenge them to action. That's what we preachers are supposed to be doing from this pulpit on Sunday mornings. Assembling the community and challenging you to action, to change our present situations of enslavement. Situations of self-deception and enslavement to the me. To put on the manure.

What is the result of Moses recognizing his people's enslavement and then acting to free them? What is the result of us recognizing our enslavements and then acting to free ourselves from their power? Many times there are no immediate, visible results. And we get frustrated.

Moses gets frustrated when nothing seems to change even after God sends 9 plagues for the Egyptian people. But Moses persistently returns to the Pharaoh after each plague asking for the release of his people. Let my people go!

Finally, after the tenth plague, the deaths of the Egyptian firstborn, the Pharaoh lets

them go and they escape through the Red Sea. Only to wander in the wilderness for another 40 years. But the wandering served a purpose just as our wandering serves a purpose. It is the time for the manure to be put on. Maybe our jobs or lack of jobs force us to wander from place to place. Maybe our personal lives cause us to wander in and out of the church. Maybe as young adults leaving home for the first time, we have the desire to wander. Maybe we really feel enslaved with our present life and we would like to change it. We would just like to wander.

The wandering; was the time during which the Israelites learned to be free and learned to be God's people. Learning to be free and learning to be a people could not have happened in the condition of slavery from which they came.

Like those Israelites we need a new exodus. We recognize our slavery and take action. We follow Jesus' call to repentance, to throw off the shackles of our old way of life so that we might become wanderers. So that the manure can be applied as we learn to be free and to be people of God.

By putting on manure we learn as the Israelites learned in the wilderness, to trust in God to provide for us and to trust in one another for support. No longer to be slaves to ourselves. No longer to live just for ourselves. But to learn how to live to serve one another, to serve our families, and to serve our God. To learn how to throw off self-dependence and self-centeredness and to learn interdependence and loving thy neighbor. It is not easy to be freed from the security of slavery. It is not easy to make changes and

choose a new path.

At the end of the forty years of wandering, God speaks to the Israelites in Deut. 8:2-4. You must remember all the road by which the Lord your God has led you these forty years . . . to humble you, to test you, and to discover whether it was in your heart to keep the commandments. God fed you on manna . . . The clothes on your back did not wear out nor did your feet swell in all these forty years.

The years in the desert can be an example for each one of us and our personal journeys of faith. When we are stripped of the props in our lives, when we lose a loved one, when we quit drinking or smoking, when we lose our jobs, when our house burns down, when nuclear weapons are eliminated; when we are stripped of the props in our lives we suddenly find ourselves wandering in the desert.

It is in the desert, surrounded by manure, stripped naked of all securities we once knew and depended on, that we learn of God's faithfulness; and the strength of being vulnerable together. In the desert we cannot make it on our own. We all become vulnerable, we all have the manure put on together. We repent together. Just as the Israelites learned to be free and learned to be a people, so can we learn to be free and to be God's people.

We recognize our slavery. We cry out in repentance for God to rescue us. We become willing to wander into the desert. We allow our lives and lifestyles to be altered. We learn to live for, bear fruit for the many, rather than just for the me. Rather than hiring

the private investigator to check out another person, we investigate ourselves. We take a look at ourselves and we make the necessary changes. We allow the manure to be put on. And we bear fruit next year and always.

Jesus tells us this morning, “Unless you repent you will all perish.” It seems so simple. Yet there are those of us who when we meet our Master will say, “Take me” instead of “Forgive me.”

Jesus would not have needed to suffer death on the cross if there was no need of repentance, if there was no need for forgiveness. Jesus did die on the cross, we do repent at least every Sunday, and we are forgiven now and always.

But if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And may the peace of God . . .

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