**Cultivating Life, Letting Go of Failure**

**Luke 13:1-9**

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 Good morning, church! This is Carole DeHart, one of your congregation’s Lay Servants. What a difference a few days makes. Last Saturday I was sharing this sermon at our Green Wood location while our clergy and lay delegates were attending the specially called Michigan Annual Conference. Then as the coronavirus concerns increased and prevented our special guest Tom Trenney from being with us, Pastor Nancy asked if I would preach Downtown this weekend. Now having cancelled our worship services and activities to help **flatten the curve** of the coronavirus outbreak, First United Methodist Ann Arbor is coming to you online.

 I pray that this finds you healthy and coping with the stress of the changes we are walking through. We may not be together in our beloved sanctuary, but we are an ongoing community of faith and love. Our strategies have to adapt, but we will find new and creative ways to love and care for one another’s needs, especially those on the margins and vulnerable.

 In our weekly Thursday Thoughts email from February 27, Pastor Nancy conveyed a description of Lent and our theme this year – Cultivating and Letting Go:

*Lent is a season of spiritual house-cleaning – an opportunity to consider what
clutter stands between us and the abundant life God created us to live. How do we
let go of old habits or stories that limit us? What do we need to cultivate within
ourselves in order to grow and flourish?*

 Over the last week the clutter has grown exponentially. Changes in the 24 hour news cycle arrived at an overwhelming pace. The news is scary, and rather than delivering answers provokes more questions. Public building closures force us to navigate in new ways to obtain services. And the inability to have large gatherings drives a wedge in our congregational life and local community. Yet here we are. Together. Virtually. in our bond of community.

 This year clergy and staff have been inspired by a worship resource Sanctified art.org The site includes sermon ideas, scripture suggestions, prayers, liturgy and art projects to be adapted for use in service. If we have been successful, you will be able to see in this video a painting by Lisle Gwynn Garrity | A Sanctified Art LLC |. Based on our scripture reading you may have already guessed what the art work depicts. The fruit is a giveaway. Indeed, they are figs hanging from the branch of a fig tree.

 I find it beautiful and mesmerizing, a source of calm and opportunity for reflection. The colors are vivid & vibrant shades of purple, green & blue. The branches seem to grow before your eyes, reaching for the light. The fruit looks tempting, and my mouth waters as I imagine what it tastes like when eaten directly from the tree. The droplets of color around the leaves make it almost seem to quiver with life…Life as God intended it to be for us. Abundant!

 Today’s scripture describes a fig tree that is **not** delivering its expected yield of fruit. In fact the owner and gardener are having a conversation about removing the tree. It is three years old and as yet has not produced any fruit. The owner sees it as a waste of precious space and would cut it down.

 But the gardener argues on behalf of the tree. “Wait. Wait one more year. Let me care for it. Let me spread manure around it. See what comes next year. If there is still no fruit, then cut it down.” Thank goodness for the gardener. I have no doubt that something grows the next year. But we don’t hear the end result. The author did not provide the end of the story. I take comfort in thinking the gardener knows the eventual outcome. I am reassured by the opportunity granted for time to nurture, tend and provide loving care of the tree. Why? Because you might get something like the image of this fig tree.

 Googling fig trees, you will probably find mentioned that it takes 3-5 years before they become fruit bearing. Did the author of this passage have that knowledge? Did the gardener? Was the owner ill informed? Regardless there is the promise of life yet to be revealed. The scripture only states that the tree has no fruit. I choose to infer then that the tree stands upright, has leaves and is green.

 In my dream, the gardener knew the fig tree would bear fruit. Down in my soul, I am confident in and am assured that God knows that fig tree and what the tree is capable of. For God created it all. The fig tree…and the vineyard in which it grew including the ground on which we walk and the sun in the sky above.

 God created the world we inhabit and **knows** all of it…which means that God knows each and every one of us. God knows what we all have lying deep within us, what is waiting to sprout if only someone tends, cultivates and waters the soil, spreading manure to breathe life into it.

 What could be summoned forth from each of us if we were kinder to ourselves? If we forgave ourselves for our actual and perceived failings? If we let go of our stumbling blocks and found a way to navigate around or through them? If we focused on what is important? In many ways, the tree is an analogy for our relationship with God. We bear fruit when we are in close relationship with God. When the tree offers shade, sustenance and a place to rest while God provides sunshine and rain.

 Our scripture today is a shining example of the choice we as humans are given. We can be like the owner and choose to discard anything that which is lacking in any way.

 Or we can choose the path of the gardener who sees a glimpse of the kingdom of God and wants to see more. That’s the crux of this lesson from Luke. Look for what is Life giving, hope filled, and overflowing with grace. It means cutting through the weeds or overgrowth to focus on that which breathes and grows. To cultivate.

 Consider for a moment your faith journey as a fig tree. Is it strong, growing, leafing out, bearing fruit, serving others, seeking justice and mercy for all? Or is it, brown, droopy, tired, withering, taking up space and giving nothing back to the earth or the community? Isn’t it time to shape our fig trees as we would have them grow? Pluck the weeds, prune the deadwood, clear the way for the sunshine of God’s love to reach your leaves & branches, create a channel for the flowing waters of God’s mercy to reach the roots of your soul and provide nourishment.

 What will you be doing this Lent to nurture and cultivate your fig tree? It is a different Lent than any of us ever imagined back on Ash Wednesday. But I would still challenge each of us to take on one new task of cultivation this Lenten season, maybe especially this Lent. Will you make five minutes for God and daily prayer, or read one Psalm each day? Will you make regular contact with a vulnerable friend via phone/Skype/email, especially seeing that our fragile neighbors are safe? Will you pick up groceries for those who can’t or shouldn’t shop? And will you faithfully come back to online worship and Bible study, until we can once again meet face to face? It’s “just” your life, your faith journey. I pray that we all take the time to spiritually clean house, letting go of clutter, and faithfully cultivate our relationship with God.

Amen.