

The Plan for More Fruit

Luke 13: 1-9

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Last fall Wes and Randy Dahle did a reflection for us that asked us a very important question, “How many apples in your seeds?” When we slice them open “on the equator” rather than “from pole to pole” we usually find between 5 and 8 seeds. Like all fruit trees, apples produce more seeds that will not become trees than they produce seeds that will be cultivated into mature trees.

This morning let’s consider the trees that grew from those seeds only because we live where it is too cold for fig trees. According to web sites from California where both fig trees and apple trees grow, both fruits need the same care habits from their gardeners. So, I believe that if Jesus lived here in western Wisconsin rather than in the Mediterranean basin, Luke might have shared this parable this way:

Jesus was walking past a pick-your-own apple orchard when he told this parable about two people walking through an orchard. Both carried clipboards. One was the person who owned the orchard, the other was a county extension agent, an expert who advises both farmers and homeowners how best to care for their fruit trees.

The orchard owner said, “My records show this old tree has not produced much fruit for the last few years. It produced no fruit in 2021. None. But its buds are getting plump, a sure sign that it is still alive and with just a bit of warm weather will soon leaf out fully. Perhaps we should remove it to make room for something new.”

The arborist consulted his clipboard. “Well according to these records, this tree is a Haralson and only about 40 years old. It should be bearing fruit for at least another 10 years, maybe longer. You did get some fruit in 2019 and 2020, and I would attribute last year’s drought to no fruit at all in 2021. I suggest that you fertilize this tree properly this spring. And before you fertilize, be sure to dig out as many weeds as you can from under its canopy. Then they won’t use the fertilizer you give the tree.”

“Good plan,” the owner said.

The cycle of planting and harvest repeats over and over in our Bibles as an inspiration for our spiritual habits. This gives the gardeners a small advantage as Bible readers. But for those who read their Bibles but do not garden, for this morning’s sermon you can imagine that you just bought a house with an apple tree, a symbol of our faith. With us as the owners, God is the expert gardener. In my Midwest small town experience, when the apple tree owner is a homeowner, the county extension agent is the garden expert available to everyone. County agents advise both home gardeners, like me, and master gardeners, like my husband, on how to improve the health of our soil so that our fruit bearing trees—for this parable fig trees for Luke’s congregation and apple trees for ours—could have a better yield. The genius of Jesus’ parable is that all fruit trees have similar needs for fertilizer. No matter where we live on planet earth, we can understand Jesus’ parable.

I did add a drought when I moved the parable to a Wisconsin apple orchard. My inspiration to rewrite this parable for the Midwest came from our Wednesday evening **Prayer +** gathering. We all saw this story as our call to continued repentance, but none of us saw ourselves as the owners of the tree. After going to bed with our discussion the last one for that day, I woke up on Thursday inspired to write the paraphrase I shared with you on page 1. My rewrite for us needed a drought as we apply the parable to our lives now.

What I still ponder is this: if I own the tree and the tree represents my faith, then the expert gardener must be the Holy Spirit. Therefore the fertilizer any faith habits that will increase the fruits of the Spirit—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22, NRSV)

On our family homestead in Lutsen, there are fruit bearing apple trees that our great grandma planted before my mother was born. As we abandoned the original farmstead site after she died and the first buildings decayed, her apple trees kept growing while the native forest rebounded on land Great Grandpa once cleared. Finally, my cousin who is from the branch of our family that inherited the homestead¹ and inherited Great Grandma’s green thumb, began tending her apple trees. The trees responded with more fruit that makes wonderful jelly.

Her apple trees stayed alive through years of neglect while our parents’ generation was busy raising children and pursuing other professions. Her apple trees

¹These cousins’ grandpa was the oldest son while my grandma was the youngest daughter.

kept bearing fruit, even in years when the fruit just fell to the ground rather than being harvested. Any seedlings from those apples were choked out by native plants. But her trees always had enough air, sunlight, and water to live. With my cousin's two intentional visits a year, her trees' yield improved. From real-life, I see parallels for our spiritual habits in 2022, a fruit of Jesus' first parable.

All earthlings that live on the land need air to live. What differentiates the living from the dead among both plants and animals is breathing. Even though plants and animals breath differently, we all need air. If our faith is the parable's tree, the tree lives because it breathes daily. This is prayer. There is no wrong way to pray, but there are ways to improve our praying just as there are ways to improve our breathing.

There are many ways to pray—last week I shared how some of us have adopted praying the Lord's Prayer three times a day this Lent—and in meetings last week learned others are joining us. Another way to pray is breath prayer whenever you hear bad news. Simply pray as you breath out, "Lord, in your mercy." This improves your prayer life no matter if it is news of war or the sound of an ambulance going by. Without prayer our faith will die. Breath prayer gives us extra oxygen when we need it most.

We also need light. This is a key principle in forestry management because the canopy of mature evergreens shade the earth in ways that make it hard for shorter trees to germinate and grow. Neglected fruit trees can die due to lack of sunlight. Great-grandma's apple trees are planted on a south facing slope high above the north shore of Lake Superior. Because other cousins manage the forest around them for lumber, those trees have been blessed with good sunlight. To my thinking, sunlight is parallel to the prayers of others in our lives. We do not control this at all. We only receive the blessings of others' prayers for us.

Great Grandma's trees also lived because they had enough water. Mainly this to where she planted them, which allowed nature to keep them watered though droughts and drained through floods. Her orchard needs no irrigation now. But that was not always true. When she first planted those trees, they were saplings that she carried buckets of water from the stream to them until they were established. Other orchards planted nearer the great rivers of the Great Plains have not fared so well in cycles of droughts and floods.

The daily and weekly habits of Bible reading, regular prayer (both alone and with others), worship, and Holy Communion are like water for our faith as it bears the Fruits of the Spirit. We all know it is wise to carry on these practices. However, there

are seasons in human life when participating in a group Bible study is easy, others when it is much harder. Family care givers often struggle to attend group Bible studies, and it doesn't matter if they are caring for their child at the beginning of life or their parent near the end of life. There are times when it is difficult to attend worship, say when a Christian is also an active member of the military and deployed. In those seasons, with insufficient water the faith fruit may yield less.

But like rain some water is always available; daily Bible reading, on-line or in the mail worship, and family or unit devotions will water our faith and bless us with a better yield than if we leave our faith to rain alone. These private practices are like Great Grandma carrying buckets of water from the stream to her saplings.

Finally, there is the issue of fertilizing. In Jesus time they used manure. In our time, our choice of fertilizer has benefitted from 2000 years of ongoing agricultural research. But manure still works, perhaps less effectively, but it works. No matter which fertilizer a gardener uses, fertilizer is always more effective if the gardener first rids the ground of weeds above the trees' roots, which is always about the same size as the tree's fruit bearing branches.

The parallel for us comes as we clear space in our schedules for something more, habits John Wesley called "means of grace." These can include "acts of mercy" such as a once in a life time mission trip. It could be working at a local charity in retirement, such as the Food Pantry. It could be making room in your on-line grocery order as you shop to feed your busy family to give to the Back Pack program. Your means of grace could mean added reading such as the two books inspiring these 2022 Lent sermons, *Atomic Habits* or *The Lord's Prayer: The Meaning and Power of the Prayer Jesus Taught*. The choice of spiritual fertilizers varies by the Christian as well as their life season. But in every season of everyone's life, making time for one of them is like clearing away the weeds so that fertilizer available now can nurture our faith so it will bear more fruit, more "love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22, NRSV)

So, friends, only the "so what" question remains for this sermon. And here it is: what fertilizer will you use to improve the soil to help your faith tree bear more fruit?

Books named:

James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. Penguin Random House, New York, 2018.

Adam Hamilton, *The Lord's Prayer: The Meaning and Power of the Prayer Jesus Taught*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2021.