

So by now, most of you know that I grew up in the country. I mean we were close enough to a main road, but for the most part we were surrounded by corn fields, in our backyard and across the street. We were a solid half hour from anything considered a “city,” and ten minutes from just our run of the mill small town. Life in the country got you accustomed to certain things, certain ways of life that people who have only ever lived in the city might have no idea how to fathom. One of these such things came to mind as I considered the gospel for this week.

When I was growing up, we didn’t have air conditioning. It was a thing my dad wouldn’t even contemplate, and so during the heat of the summer our house was cooled entirely by the efforts of open windows and an attic fan. It was pretty much square in the middle of the house, and turned on by a little knob in the hallway by our telephone. It did an...ok job at cooling the house down, particularly when the nights weren’t sweltering, but there was one distinct disadvantage to this setup. The attic fan took the outside air and churned it through the house, which meant that with the air also came the *smell* of the air. Most of the time this wasn’t a huge issue, except once planting season started. Once the farmers around us started the process of getting their fields ready for the next season, our house was not a pleasant place to be when the attic fan was on. I will leave it to the

wonderful content of your imaginations what our house smelled like for a decent portion of the summer.

However, here's the thing, there was something else that I loved about living in the country. By midsummer, you were never far from freshly picked corn on the cob. Road side stands, a lot of them run by my friends from school would pop up all over the place and we would pick up a dozen ears multiple times a week to get in as much of what is still the best corn on the cob I've ever had as we could for that particular season. The connection I never made in my head though was the fact that that corn wasn't really possible, without the inevitable grossness that pervaded our house every summer either. If the fields weren't prepped accordingly, then the corn probably wouldn't grow as well. If they were mismanaged, the crop would be mediocre and summer just wouldn't quite be the same. It's a weird realization to come to to realize that you sometimes need the gross gunk in life in order to get to the good stuff. It's a reality that Jesus says much more eloquently than I just did, but at it's heart, that is, essentially, the message of our gospel this morning.

We find Jesus once again in the position of being challenged with a seemingly impossible question to answer. It's one of those questions that the people asking think they know the answer to already, or at least they

know what they want to hear from Jesus, and so they lay the challenge down and Jesus once again has to maneuver through the delicacies of rhetoric to get to the ultimate point he wants to make about the kingdom of God to this specific group of people.

The issue at hand for these folks is basically the gradations of sin. They're living in a world that has seen more than a handful of tragedies. There are rumors flying around the area that Pilate has started mixing in human blood with sacrifices that he is making at the Roman temples as an insult to injury punishment for those traitors to the state that he has had executed. Not only is he executing Jewish folks at will, he's then using their blood in worship to false gods. Then there has been a disaster of infrastructure in Israel. There was a tower located in the Old City section of Jerusalem and recently it has collapsed, killing 18 people. The people who have come to question Jesus want to know one thing, are the people whose blood is being used in Roman sacrifices, are the people who were killed in this tragedy *more* sinful than others? Is that why they have suffered such egregious fates, because their sins were larger, greater, worse than the sins of other people who have died in more common ways?

In his typical fashion, Jesus basically waves away these questions as basically meaningless and drives to a deeper point. Sin is sin, and one's

sinfulness is not an indicator of how much or what kind of suffering one will experience. Obviously, one's personal sin can *lead* to a particular form of suffering, but God is not up in heaven with some divine karma scorecard matching up sin with its equally matched suffering. Jesus basically says, everyone sins, and because everyone sins, you should repent, plain and simple. However, he then kind of changes tactic.

If left with just this one message, it makes Jesus sound very dark and ominous. *Repent or perish!* Yet, he then turns to a parable. A parable of a landowner, his gardener, and a fig tree. The landowner complains to his gardener that a fig tree he planted three years ago still remains barren, and he's ready to chop it down. Apparently it doesn't matter that it takes fig trees *three to five years* to mature and bear fruit, our landowner is fresh out of patience and wants to be done with the whole dang thing. Yet, the gardener steps in and advocates for time, for tending, for well, gunk. He asks for the ability to nurture the tree one more year with the handy dandy farm tool of manure, and if that still doesn't work, well then they can talk about chopping it down. For Jesus' audience this parable does serve moderately as a warning, bear fruit or there may be consequences, but more than anything, I actually think that this parable serves as a story of second

chances, of nurturing, of growing in the midst of and sometimes because of the gunk that is thrown at us.

The “easy” theology here would be to say that if you sin, if you don’t bear fruit, well then it’s off to the chopping block, and yet Jesus very rarely goes the easy route with anything, and I think we all can be immensely grateful for that. Jesus reminds God’s people of one fundamental God-truth, that their God is, and has always been, a God of second chances. Their history is riddled with sinful people who are perpetually given another and another and another opportunity to get it right. Never without consequences, but also never without steadfast, whole-hearted, covenantal love. What Jesus is reminding people of here is that sometimes those consequences, or simply just the unmitigated gross, bad stuff that we endure at the hands of life, not at the hands of God, is the thing that helps us grow the most, that helps us mature, that nurtures us, that brings us to a point of being able to bear fruit abundantly because of what we have been through. Seemingly, in the midst of this admittedly difficult conversation that Jesus is in with this crowd, he is able to deliver a message of grace and a message of encouragement, a message that transcends the passage of time because for as much as people in 1st century Israel needed to hear this, we in 21st century America need it just as badly.

So often, we tend to operate with a one and done mentality, with others, and particularly between ourselves and God. We fear that one mistake writes us off for eternity, particularly when that one mistake feels gigantic or insurmountable. We fear that God looks at us like a barren fig tree, we have a woeful tendency to look at ourselves like that barren fig tree and assume that we have no chance. Who we are must be broken, fragile, messy people who are incapable of change or doing anything right and how in the world can God love us in the midst of that? This parable is God's reminder that that really isn't how God operates. God is a God of second chances, God is a God of shoveling manure upon the broken, unfruitful, needing to be nurtured parts of our hearts and saying there, let's see what you can do now. Let's try this again. God's grace is the ultimate promise of chance upon chance upon chance, even if we don't always enjoy the process.

I think each of us can think back on times in our lives which we could only describe as manure filled, where we could see zero good ever coming out of the situation we found ourselves in. For me, being ten years old and going through my parents' divorce was a bit manurey, and honestly that's kind of putting it lightly. I couldn't imagine anything positive coming into my life because of it or out of that situation. Yet...somehow, in the midst of the immensely difficult, my sisters and I cultivated a friendship, a bond, a

closeness that is unparalleled and unbreakable. Somehow, now, I see my parents both happier than I ever could have imagined them to be. Somehow, we all grew more from that massive amount of gunk than we probably ever could have thought possible. We all have these stories, those moments that we thought would break us, that we thought would make us incapable of bearing anymore fruit, those trials and tests of faith which we were certain would shatter whatever faith we had left. And yet...somehow, through some miracle of a God who knows how to turn gunk into grace, we find ourselves better, stronger, happier, more resilient, more faithful than we ever thought possible. I know, we all really, really wish we could have those things happen without the gunk, and yet, as our gospel reminds us, sometimes the best fruit comes from the tree that has had the gunk spread around it.

My prayer for all of us not only this Lenten season, but for every day ahead is that we remember that no chance is our only chance, but that God perpetually stands in front of us offering another opportunity for change and for growth. My prayer for all of us is that when those opportunities present themselves, even when they are hard, even when they make our entire houses smell just plain gross, that we're able to see through the gunk to the beauty, the abundance that is being cultivated within us. My most fervent prayer for all of us is that God is able to turn our gunk into manure. **AMEN!**