

Time for the Amendment of Life

Third Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Saturday, March 6, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Years ago, I bought my mother a lilac bush, having fond memories of the huge, fragrant lilac bush beside my maternal grandmother's front porch. I eagerly helped my mom to plant it: First digging the ground and placing the tree, carefully raking the soil, enveloping the base of the bush with more soil, and then adding cocoa mulch to retain moisture and watering it well. It seemed to me we would have a flourishing lilac bush in no time.

It didn't bloom the first two years. Mom thought it had too much shade, so she moved it into the backyard to a sunnier spot. That next year she saw a few leaves, but no blooms. After a fourth year of pretty much nothing, she was tempted to get rid of it. But ultimately my mom decided to spend more time with that lilac bush, patiently caring for it, hoping her nurture would yield precious blossoms. I am so glad she did, for 25 years later, the lilac bush is lovely!

My mom was like the vinedresser in the parable Jesus tells in our Gospel lesson today—the vinedresser who takes care of a fig tree in the vineyard he tends. She was like him because she established a grace period—an allotment of extra time to permit productivity. In Jesus' story, a man had planted a fig tree and went out to see whether it bore any fruit. It had not—for 3 years, in fact—and the man wanted the tree cut down and allow the ground under it to be put to better use. But the vinedresser persuades him with these words: "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

A grace period, an allotment of time for productivity. The vinedresser offers another chance for the fig tree, and he will dig around it, spread fertilizer to nourish it, lavish his attention upon it, in order for it to bear fruit. Note that the vinedresser puts a limit on the grace period. One year, he says. There is a point when the grace period ends, and the fig tree will die, if it remains unproductive.

Jesus tells this parable to those who are busy gossiping about other folks—whether other folks' sinfulness created the havoc those people experienced, whether other folks were bad, and that's why bad things happened to them. Jesus doesn't consider such discussion useful, but a waste of time. Precious time when the people asking those questions instead could be about the task of faithful living. He turns the discussion from those **other** folks to the gossiping folks themselves and says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Jesus says there is a limit for us. There is an end, and a judgment, which all of us face. And there is a certain period of time before that end which offers each of us an opportunity to be faithful, to be productive, to bear good fruit for the sake of God and for the sake of his creation. The Church, particularly during the season of Lent, speaks of this limit and this grace period. Those of you familiar with older Lutheran liturgies might recall one of the confessions in the red hymnal (SBH). The pastor had a choice of two absolutions. One of them was this: *The almighty and merciful God grant unto you, being penitent, pardon and remission of all your sins, time for the amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of his Holy Spirit.*

Time for the amendment of life. A grace period, if you will, in which you and I can respond to the tender nurturing of God, to the loving attention and care our Lord lavishes upon us. Time for the amendment of life—because in our lives we have not always been productive. It's what we need—one more chance to bear fruit.

Mark was an alcoholic. His wife and daughter didn't know what else to do. They begged and pleaded with him to admit his problem. They worried when he stayed out all night, and only wearily rested when he returned in a drunken stupor in the wee hours of the morning. One day his wife Lois told him, "I will leave you, and I will take our daughter with me, if you do not begin to change now. I'll help you. I'll support you. But I swear to God, this is your last chance." Mark looked into her eyes, and he knew she meant all of it. She was giving him time to amend his life...one more chance.

Jim was a **workaholic**, rarely taking a vacation. His family became accustomed to his being busy with his career 24/7. For years Jim and his wife Mary talked about going on vacation, maybe buying a little boat, but that's all it was—talk—and vacation would be shelved for another year. Then Mary discovered a lump in her breast, and Jim and Mary realized there might not be other years.

Helen, even into her early '70's, was treated like a little princess by her husband. He did everything for her. Not just the usual stuff, like car maintenance and lawn care and so on. But he handled the bulk of the cooking, the laundry and other housework while she laid down because she had aches and pains and this and that and didn't feel particularly perky some days. He was very kind to her. But he died first, and suddenly the little princess had no one to tend to her. Her grown-up children were supportive, but they couldn't do all Helen's husband had done. The house needed cleaning, the laundry done, the bills paid, the groceries bought. Somehow Helen learned how to master those things. But once the chores were accomplished, and she sat back down on her couch, she noted a huge gap of time left for her, and the silence of that house haunted her.

Luke, in telling this story of Jesus and his parable is announcing to the Church our grace period. God sent Jesus to us to nurture us along, to care for us fully and patiently, just like that vinedresser. So that in this time you and I might change our ways, turn from what is unproductive (and in fact what has become often destructive), and turn instead to the active, fruit-bearing life of living in Christ. Jesus steps into the midst of our human failures, taking on the burdensome work of

tending to us. He nourishes us with his fertile word. He waters us in our baptism with forgiveness and the power of the Spirit. He gives us precious time to amend our lives and turn back to him. And such amendment does indeed happen. The stories I tell you are true—these stories are of friends I have known.

Mark, faced with a grace period, after which he would be alone, without wife and daughter, used that precious time and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. He battled that disease, and his wife and daughter stood by him in those battles. And the grace period found him bearing fruit. In fact, eventually, Mark became a seminary classmate of mine, and was ordained a pastor, ministering to a congregation with wife and daughter beside him.

Mary had her cancerous breast removed, and needed repeated sessions of chemotherapy before she was pronounced “clean.” Meanwhile, Jim began to take days off, and they bought a little boat. On days as she recovered, and in the years that followed, you would often find them paddling around Raystown Lake, fishing a little, talking a lot, spending precious time together.

Helen had all this time on her hands, but it took awhile until she realized it was a grace period. Someone in her church asked her to become a nursery attendant, and she got down on the floor of all things and played with the kids who were full of life, energy and mischief. She was so very kind to them. She offered to launder the altar cloths each week, lovingly ironing and folding them. Then a fellow parishioner took her to the local senior center. I think they created a monster! She became a leader at the senior center, even directing its band, which consisted of a piano, two trumpets, a drum set and a kazoo (Helen played the kazoo and danced while she played). And Helen, who had once been the world’s greatest hypochondriac, took under her wing those at the center who were apt to launch into lengthy discussions of their aches and pains, doctor appointments and medicines. In a most tender manner, she would smoothly navigate them to other activities. The grace period of time on Helen’s hands had opened her blossoms.

Jesus calls us all to self-examination, to realize the limits in our lives, and the deadwood we often carry. He is looking for buds on our branches. He offers us his grace period—the grace period of his presence in our midst. And he offers us his patience and nurturing and power to see us through to Springtime. **AMEN.**

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