

Sunday March 20, 2022
First Lesson: Psalm 63: 1-8
Gospel Lesson: Luke 13: 1-19
Sermon Series: The Pruning Effect
Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are continuing our Lenten sermon series entitled “Pruning Effect;” and as a quick review for those who might be tuning into this sermon series for the very first time;

- We are using the imagery of a tree, bush, or shrub as the imagery of this sermon series; where just as the idea of actual pruning, means to trim; as in a tree, shrub, or bush; by cutting away dead or overgrown branches or stems, especially to increase fruitfulness and growth;
- I am suggesting that there will be times in our own spiritual journey; where the same spiritual pruning process will need to occur, if we wish to bear much fruit in our life journeys.
- In where the process of spiritual pruning in my eyes, involves a time of self- reflection, self-introspection and self examination— through means of journaling,

praying, reading of Scripture or other inspirational books that might feed our souls; through worship, fellowship, teachings and trainings; all of these methods are focused on improving the spiritual heart and soul conditions; thereby providing the right fertile conditions for us to bear much fruit in our life journeys together.

- And so I would like to start my sermon off this morning, by first sharing the positive impact that I had with our Confirmation students this past Wednesday.
- For it was in my observation in this class from our Confirmation students; that in many ways gave me the perfect segue to how I might begin to unpack our two scriptures this morning;
- For our gospel out of Luke in particular this morning, is a very tough passage of scripture to preach about;
- For you heard the passage with your own words....it really isn't pleasant is it?
- **For the gospel this morning is talking about** repentance and perishing if one does not repent;

- **The gospel is talking about** barren fig trees and cutting it down if it doesn't produce any fruit; a passage in which I did talk about a few Sunday's ago...but still...it's really heavy stuff right?!
- **Finally our gospel this morning is talking about** blood and sacrifices; topics that ironically we did talk about deeply in the Bible Study class that happens on Wednesdays as well at 4:15;
- But what was humorous about that particular class (before my looking at the Sunday scriptures later), I remember saying to the class something along the lines; that you would never hear me talking about blood or sacrifices on a Sunday morning;
- I suppose this is why a person should never say the word never!

- **And yet here we are...for our gospel this morning is not mincing any words with us this morning... the message is pretty clear that we are created to bear fruit... or else....and I don't know about you, but it is the "or else" that becomes quite challenging for both the preacher and the listener;**
- And so I give thanks from my learnings from our youth, who will help me to dive into the "or else" portion of our gospel this morning; who as I share this story; the goal is that we all will be ever so inspired; to continue to allow this spiritually pruning process to occur in our own lives fully;
- Because when I grow up...I want to be just like these 5th and 6th graders;
- For if you allow me a few minutes to make some space right now to support this affirmation further; I think you might feel the same way;
- For the date was Wednesday March 16, 2022;
- The time was roughly 7:05pm or so;
- The setting was Black Fellowship Hall downstairs;

- The class participants in which I got permission to share their names were Maggie (5th grade), Dexter (6th grade), Alex (adult confirmand), Pastor Caity and myself; one of our confirmation students was out for Spring Break Activities.
- We were beginning our time together on naming our number for the day of how our day was going on a scale to 1-10; 1 being not so good and 10 being great!
- Dexter shared that his number was a 3-4 because he got to go fishing because he loves the outdoors, but his number was lower because he didn't catch any fish.
- Maggie shared that her number was a 6-7 because she met her step goal of 6,000 steps. To be exact, she shared that her step count was 7,905 for the day so far.
- Dexter piped up and said, "Oh well my step count for the day was 15,013 steps," in which I immediately looked at my Apple Watch to check my step count;

knowing that I would be embarrassed to read what it said...but I did it anyway...

- My step count was 3,741 steps!
- I immediately spoke up in the class and said “Hold up....wait a minute...”
- And I turned to Alex and asked him....how many steps do you have? He said pretty defeatedly, “3,353 steps and I worked and was on my feet all day.”
- I turned to Caity and asked her the same question, in which she replied equally as defeated “4,736 steps.”
- And so I turned back to Maggie and asked her how long she had such an ambitious step goal for herself and she looked at me with this expression as if to say, “Duh Kirstie,” but instead she said, “I don’t know ever since I got my Fitbit about a year ago,” but her tone still had that incredulous sound to it.
- Dexter then chimed in that 15,013 steps was not even his highest step count day; his highest count was something like 35,000 steps— and I need to tell you all that even when I ran/walked the half marathon

with Stephen 3 times or so, my step count was never that much!

- However, why I chose this story to begin our conversation this morning, is because I want us to zone in on what Maggie said earlier;
- **Maggie has set a step goal for herself—** ever since she got her Fitbit about a year ago to have 6,000 steps a day;
- **Maggie articulated a major level of self-awareness** to us all that day; when she essentially shared with us; that her day was improved, because she succeeded and met a personal improvement goal for herself; a step count of 6,000 steps a day;
- And some may chalk this whole story up to suggest that these youth's step achievement is simply because they are young and nothing more;
- However, I am inviting us to look at this step count story as a metaphor for another possibility for what being open to spiritual pruning/fruitfulness is all about;

- For staying in this Confirmation story just a little bit longer, I also need to tell you that when I first got my Fitbit and now I have an Apple Watch; but roughly 6 years ago or so, **I too used to have a step count goal** for myself as well;
- **I used to have a step goal** of 10,000 steps a day; a goal in which I cared about just as much as Maggie did;
- There was a time where I too **used to see my achieving this goal** as a sign that my mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health was in check and balanced;
- **And if I am honest with myself**, the days that my apple watch reflected only having 4,000 steps for the day; those were the days where I may not have cared for myself as well as I should have;
- **If I am honest**, those were the days where I may have been the most over worked, under-rested and overwhelmed;
- **If I am honest**, if I have an average week of 3,000 to 4,000 steps a day; it becomes a cumulative

downward spiral effect for me; mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually, where I suddenly find myself producing little to no fruit— because I am overworked, under-rested and stressed out...

- So the good news is because of this Confirmation class, I am back to slowly incorporating fitness back into my personal routine; for like Maggie, meeting an activity goal is a sign of vitality and fruitfulness in my own life journey as well;
- However it is in this personal engagement with our Confirmation students that I feel led to ask this question of all of us;
- **When did some of us** stop counting our steps?
- **When did some of us** begin to notice when our own spiritual fruit production started to reduce or slow down?
- **When did some of us** stop producing fruit altogether?
- These are some vital questions that I bring to our two scriptures today; working on the assumption that **there was a time when all of us were** like Maggie

and Dexter; my life experience tells me this is so; for I can't be alone in this phenomena can I?

- For I am certain that **there was a time when we all were** just as mindful and intentional to ensure that we were giving each day every thing we had with a spirit of cheerfulness, hopefulness, creativity and inquiry; one step at a time; with a goal of increasing our steps towards this goal of spiritual productivity every day;
- But then something changes.... Aging hits us, life hits us, circumstances hits us, obligations and duties hits us; priorities shift and seem to have a way of taking over everything; **it seems to have a way of taking over our steps or stalling our steps altogether;** as it pertains to spiritual fruit production;
- And this is not a judgment...it is an opportunity for us to name an awareness;
- That our metaphorical steps are not once what they were;

- **Furthermore, if you look closely at our two scriptures this morning, we are seeing two themes;**
- **One passage is revealing to us what Spiritual fruitfulness and steps towards fruit production looks like at it's finest;**
- While the other passage is revealing to us **what happens when you and I lose sight or focus or simply quit counting our steps;**
- **One passage of scripture reveals the benefits** that happens, when you and I take steps towards allowing the spiritual pruning process to take root in our lives;
- While the other passage reveals to us what happens when you and I are not open to being spiritually pruned.
- Psalm 63 reveals the psalmist having a mountain top experience with God;
- For **the psalmist was** thrilled by God's **power** (v. 2).
- **The psalmist was** transfixed by God's **glory** (v. 2).
- **The psalmist was** amazed at God's **lovingkindness**, finding it **better than life itself**.

- **The psalmist was meditating** on these discoveries of truth and came to the conclusion of these things I would submit, because of allowing himself to take these important steps towards being spiritually pruned by God; through spiritual contemplation, fellowship, worship, praise and adoration;
- For it was through this spiritual pruning process; that the psalmist learned that God's ways and teachings has helped him;
- For remember before, **how the psalmist was backed up against the wall;**
- His enemies were ready to attack him, because his trifling ways of murder, infidelity and betrayal and more— had caught up with him;
- Until the psalmist one day cried out to God in Psalm 51:10 in our lectionary scripture on Ash Wednesday; *Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me;*
- And so it was because the psalmist took the time to retrace his steps; to see where he went astray; it was because of his openness to this spiritual pruning

process; that the psalmist David is now testifying in our psalm today; *My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast and my mouth praises you with joyful lips!*

- **Focusing more closely on our gospel of Luke this morning;** that I will reiterate is talking a lot about blood, and the need for repentance, perishing and a potential barren fig tree; it is in all of this description; we are seeing a stark contrast from our earlier psalm;
- For you and I are not getting the same feeling of freedom and satisfaction that is radiating from our psalmist.
- For to give some background on what is going on in our gospel; this paragraph of our gospel is found only in Luke.
- It consists of reference to two incidents, which took place in or near Jerusalem— and Jesus responds to these recent incidents by way of a parable.
- The gospel informs us that **There were some present** —or, “there came some”—who told Jesus of a recent tragedy.

- Evidently Pilate had become displeased with a group of Galileans and had them killed right in the Temple, so that their blood was mingled with that of their sacrifices.
- Now while no record of this has been found elsewhere, it is in keeping in line with what is known of the cruel character of Pilate and the revolutionary fanaticism of the Galileans.
- For there were many records of many horrible massacres that took place in this period.
- So it is not surprising or out of the ordinary that this one, in which perhaps only a few were killed, did not receive much attention.
- **It is however possible** that it was this incident, which caused Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, to be at enmity with Pilate (23:12).
- Where Herod may have been upset at Pilate's treatment of his Galilean subjects.
- Nevertheless, Jesus seized upon this opportunity of these two rulers being at odds with one another, to enforce an important truth.

- For as I attempt to paint this story more vividly; although some of the Jerusalem Jews may have concluded that these Galileans were hypocritical, wicked men, Jesus wanted to highlight that their tragic fate, did not prove that they were worse sinners than those who survived.
- Jesus said in v 4 of our Gospel; “Of those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them —do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?”
- You see this is a question that could be seen as a warning to all; who would interpret calamities as evidence of wickedness; that this is not a situation for condemnation **but one for compassion.**
- **For there is nothing worse** than witnessing something that has so much potential, not live up to it’s full potential;
- **It’s like a man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard;** and he came looking for fruit on it and the gardener found none;

- And the most perplexing point about this particular fig tree is that the tree on the outside....it looked like it had potential;
- For I don't know about you, but every time I pictured this fig tree in our gospel (and this is going to be embarrassing, because I know that this is not a fig tree), but this is the tree for some reason that I had in my mental imagery...the tree in Charlie Brown that was weighed down by the one big red ornament;
- This is the tree that I imagined was in our parable.
- However, I decided to research what the fig tree most likely looked like in our gospel and I wanted to show you what it probably looked like— Anyone surprised?
- For I don't know about you, but I was astonished to learn that the tree most likely looked like this until I thought about it...and you know what Church family; **the gospel doesn't really inform us** that there is really anything wrong per se with this fig tree;
- **The gospel doesn't really give the reader** a clue of why this fig tree isn't producing any fruit;

- **The gospel doesn't tell us that there were** brown spots on this tree or **that there were** dropping leaves on this tree or **that there was** even slow growth with this tree—**that would prevent this tree from producing any fruit;**
- And say for instance, **even if there were ailments** with this tree — the good news is that most of these problems are easily cured with an actual fig tree, if a person knows what to look for;
- So you see the lesson of this parable is fairly obvious.
- The **fig tree** is the Jewish nation, which had failed to bring forth fruit for **three years**.
- Now why this is the case...we may never truly know;
- But there is a collective theory that biblical scholars have deduced; to the possible reasoning of the absence of fruit;
- Their theory was that the fruit shortage of the Jewish nation, referred to the failure of the Jewish leaders, to respond to Jesus during the three years of His ministry.

- Their fruit production may have become hindered, because of not fully receiving God's story to be their story; which in turn becomes our story;
- That as I echo the words of John 1; *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life,[a] and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it;*
- You see for some reason, the people were having a difficult time discovering their light;
- The people had waited a long time for the One who would come and save them from destruction, but they could not glean the most important lesson from Jesus—and that is **that the light was already within them...** it just needed to come forth;
- You see no matter what Jerusalem was going through, war, famine, destruction and more... these unfortunate

occurrences did not change the fact— **that the light was still within them;**

- And the reason we know this, is because the Creator designed it that way;
- When Genesis 1:26-27 says “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth;” this section that encapsulates the Imago Dei, **let’s us know that the light is there within us;**
- This is why I keep insisting that **just as the problem is in our midst, so is the solution in our midst;**
- For the greatest gift that humanity could ever receive is grace and this grace is the light that each and every one of our human particles and electrons was build upon.
- **First United Methodist Church of Lincoln NE, The competitive light with me would like to think that we are named First for a reason;**
- For we are like this fig tree planted in the vineyard;

- And as your spiritual leader, I can wholeheartedly attest that where we differ drastically from our gospel this morning, is that we are a fig tree that has proven its potential and then some;
- For we have not only produced fruit for three years unlike our parable; our story reveals that First United Methodist Church was founded in 1888 by men and women who were devoted to Christ's teachings and dedicated to the education that Nebraska Wesleyan University ([NWU](#)) would provide the families of University Place;
- So my math tells me that we have been producing fruit for not just 3 years, but **for over 134 plus years**;
- For 134 plus years** we have been striving to live out the words of Micah;
- **For 134 plus years** we have been striving to do justice,
- For 134 plus years** we have been striving to love kindness,
 - For 134 plus years** we have been striving to walk humbly with our God;
 - For 134 plus years**, we have been committed to meeting our spiritual pedometer goals and we have

made steps towards becoming the agape love that God holds for all of humanity;

- But I stopped by to suggest as your spiritual assigned gardener, that I can see a decline in our fruit production;
- **And I know that a lot of us are tired** emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically;
- **I know a lot of us are tired** because of covid fatigue, grief fatigue, life fatigue, financial fatigue, war fatigue and people fatigue;
- So this is not a judgment; but I'm naming an awareness; that we must not stop counting our steps now;
- For there will be a real temptation to allow a decline in our fruit production to become our reality and I'd like us to come together and reverse this decline;
- For **look at our tree** and how much potential it has;
- **Look at how green our fig leaves are**....we have youth here ready and eager to learn;
- **Look how healthy our roots are**....we have classes and small groups with people ready to learn and grow;
- **Look at how thick our roots are**; these roots reflect **134 years plus** of great teachers, leaders, volunteers,

pastors, music, efforts and conversations surrounding justice and peace and love and more ;

- These roots reflect **134 plus years** of hearts and hands invested in missions steeped in what it means to nurture, to do mercy and justice and more; and we can't forget Abe who looks at us from above; who was famous for his quote in his speech at the Illinois Republican State Convention in Springfield, Illinois; June 16, 1858; a quote that Alex recalled in our small group on Wednesday;
- That "A house divided against itself cannot stand."
- A quote that was made during a time where Lincoln felt that the ideals of freedom for all and the institution of slavery could not coexist — morally, socially, or legally — under one nation.
- You see for Lincoln, Slavery must ultimately be universally accepted or universally denied;
- I stopped by to suggest that the survival of the Church as a whole across the board must reign true; through our

commitment to the mission and ministry of the church in the same fashion; **we cannot be divided on this;**

- **We cannot coexist like this;**
- Although our opinions on how things move forward will always be in conversation... this is more than ok;
- However we must organize our efforts to be aligned in one mind and one spiritual movement;
- Where our presence in this Church states a unified belief that we will survive;
- Our living witness must indicate a unified belief that we will thrive;
- For our 134 plus years is a reminder of just how fruitful we really are;
- And so the commitment that I am asking from all of us to renew right now— is to be unified in this truth in our hearts and in our minds;

- **To be unified** through our rich history that is diverse, unique and rich in every way;
- **To be unified** by our love for the mission of the great community of First United Methodist of Lincoln NE;
- Lord, **help us to be unified** by our love and commitment towards one another;
- Through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness; that is lead by the direction of the Spiritual Gardner; that continues to dig around our metaphorical soil and fertilize it year after year with new leaders, resources, opportunities and more;
- First United Methodist Church of Lincoln NE, let us be unified in what our 134 plus years presents to us this morning; another reminder to us all **that the best is truly yet to come;**
- Let all who has ears, let them hear; (Matthew 11:15)
- Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!

