

Sunday March 27, 2022
First Lesson: Psalm 32
Gospel Lesson: Luke 15: 103, 11b-32
Sermon Series: 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 symbol of a tree, bush, or shrub as the main 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, so that fruitfulness and growth may be increased;
- 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;
- Where the process of spiritual pruning in my eyes; involves a time of self- reflection, journaling,

prayer, reading of Scripture or other inspirational books that might feed our soul and spirit; 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 this week we are presented with two readings; that on the surface may seem as if they have **nothing to do with one another;**
- However, by the time this sermon is over, my preaching goal is to demonstrate how these two scriptures **have everything to do with one another;**
- For **it is in these readings,** I am submitting that we might discover the heart of why we are here right now, in this sanctuary;
- **It is in these readings,** that I am suggesting that you and I might begin to think about the following questions on a deeper level;

- **Why we choose** to come to Church?
- **Why we choose** to engage in community?
- **Why we choose** to give back to community?
- **Why we choose** to invest in our community?
- **Why we choose** to learn more about Jesus?
- **Why we may even choose** to believe in Jesus?
- For it is **in these readings** that I submit; you and I are witnessing the human condition unfold right before our very eyes;
- For in both our Psalm and our Gospel this morning, I am suggesting that there are common themes that relate to our life journeys and the overall human experience and condition;
- For **there are themes** of someone needing or seeking forgiveness;
- **There are themes** of someone searching for something, only to discover that the something they were searching for was already right there in front of them;

- There are some familial dynamics **where themes** of betrayal, anger, conflict and resentment are leaping from the pages;
- **There are themes** surrounding sin and an invitation to both the reader and parties involved in the story; to discern how God might respond to our sins;
- This is a long way of suggesting that **there is a lot going on** in our two readings today;
- **Furthermore, there are a lot of** different angles of how one attempting to preach these passages of scriptures could go;
- However where I would like to start unpacking these stories is by picking up from last week's gospel; that talked about the parable of the barren tree in Luke 13;
- **You all remember** the parable of the fig tree that was at risk of being cut down, because it had not produced fruit after 3 years;

- The owner of the fig tree was sick and tired of this declared barren fig tree not producing any fruit; as a result, the man wanted to cut the tree down altogether;
- Until the gardener came onto the scene and basically said to the man, “**hold up, wait a minute; 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;**”
- You see church, I believe that why many of us come to Church, is because of this metaphorical gardener in the story;
- **I believe that what keeps many of us** coming back to Church week after week, is because of what this gardener in our passage represents;
- **For the gardener in this story** represents grace;
- **The gardener in this story** represents mercy;
- **The gardener in this story** represents forgiveness;

- **The gardener in this story** represents hope;
- **Hope for** the lost;
- **Hope for** the broken;
- **Hope for** the downtrodden;
- **Hope for** the one who has veered off from their path and just needs someone to give them a second chance;
- **Or a little** nudge;
- **Or a little** assurance;
- **That they have not** ruined their life;
- **That they can reset** their life;
- **That they can reconcile the things** in their life that has gone awry;
- **That they can be** restored and healed and transformed;
- **All they need is someone like this gardener,** who can come and tend to their soil for a little while;

- **All they need is someone**, that can really see who they are and see their potential and be willing to invest in them;
- **All they need is a safe space** for them to be able to grow and thrive and be allowed to produce the fruit in their own time; in their own way;
- **All they need** is someone who will not give up on them, or turn their back on them, or turn their nose up towards them;
- I tell you Church, **there is something about this gardener** that caused me to preach about him just one more time;
- **There is something about this gardener**, that makes her simply irresistible; **there is a way about this gardener** that draws us in;
- For as we bring in our gospel this morning of Luke 15, we are seeing the same characteristics of the gardener in Luke 13; manifesting in the father—who draws us in—perhaps in a similar way;

- For we are told that Jesus is being criticized for welcoming sinners and eating with them;
- And Jesus response to these critics was by telling a parable;
- A parable that is sometimes called the Parable of the Two Sons.
- For while verses 11–24 describe the younger of the two, verses 25–32 deals with the older brother.
- The opening words are: **A certain man had two sons**; giving the reader and listener of this story a hint, **that this parable will have** a twofold purpose; according to many biblical scholars:
- **The first purpose**; to show that God’s love for humanity is always there— in spite of our sins;
- **The second purpose**; was to address the Pharisees, in their harsh lack of love for repentant sinners.
- Thereby revealing a major “aha” moment in this story; as it pertains to the Pruning Effect that I have been naming in several different ways during

this sermon series— and that is that not only is this spiritual pruning process a necessary process that we must do if we wish to produce fruit in our life journeys;

- **It is a safe process for us to enter into—** when the gardener is God;
- For in Luke 13, **the gardener is God;**
- In our gospel today, the father of these two sons **represents God;**
- Where although the Word tells us that the younger son squandered his share of the property that the father gave him;
- The younger son was still able to return home, even after verse 14 of our gospel tells us that the son “spent everything.....meanwhile a severe famine took place throughout the country and he (the younger son) began to be in need.”
- So the first thing that the son does in verse 15; tells us that, “he went and hired himself out to one

of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.”

- So at this point the younger son is in dire straits; for the gospel tells us in verse 16 that, “He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and even in that....no one gave him anything!”
- Then verse 17 reveals that the younger son was beginning to think of his father. He said; “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger.” Verse 18; “ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; v19 “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”
- And I need to tell you Church, that as I step out of this story for just a moment; our 5:30 class on Wednesdays called “Applying the Sermon to Life;” a class that looks at the scriptures ahead and

helps Pastor Caity and myself interpret these scriptures in a way that is meaningful to our community;

- **I need to share**, that there was a lot of discussion as to why this son chose to return to his father's house;
- There was a lot of questions surrounding the motives of why this son decided to return home;
- **One of the theories shared** was that this son was desperate and returned home because he was hungry physically;
- **One of the theories shared** was that the son returning home was a sign of his humility;
- However, regardless of the what or the why, the entire class was moved by the father's response;
- For the father does not take the younger son up on his offer and hire him as one of his hired hands;
- On the contrary verse 22 tells us that the father asked his hired hands for a robe—the best one—and put it on him (his younger son);

- The father then puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet;
- The father asked for a fatted calf and killed it and proclaimed “let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”
- Making it clear that in our spiritual pruning process; we are always welcome without conditions back into the Fathers house;
- We are always welcome back into God’s house;
- Thereby making what the challenge to this spiritual pruning process obvious in this story, for those of us wishing to be courageous enough as the younger son to be able to return back home—being **the older brother**....
- **The older brother** who in my eyes represents a society, that is not as forgiving as God is;
- **The older brother**; who represents a culture that may not be as welcoming to those who are ready to return back home.

- **The older brother** who in verse 28 ‘became so angry at this father that he refused to go in!’
- **The older brother who was so outraged** at the father, that he told him in verse 29 “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him””
- So in this, the father in our gospel reversed the situation.
- He said to his older son, **Son**—not the word for “son” in the previous verse, but literally, “child,” an endearing term—**you are always with me**—all the family privileges have been yours all the time—**and all that is mine is yours**—your inheritance is safe.

- But here is the main takeaway for us to continue to think about as we strive to share God's love to all as a Church community and that is this idea that **this was the younger son's inheritance too;**
- This Truth is something that will always be true for God, no matter what you and I may have done,
- Regardless of the mistakes we have made or will make in the future;
- Just like I as a mother would never disown my own children;
- God will never disown you,
- God will never disown me,
- **This is what** God's grace is all about;
- **This is what** God's forgiveness is all about;
- **This is what** God's mercy is all about;
- **This is what** God's love is all about;
- Like Paul said in Romans 8: 38-39; ***For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, [39] Nor***

height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- It is this truth church family, that we must remember, as we strive to seek ways to revitalize our community— as others are finding themselves discerning whether it is safe or not to return home;
- **That this is their inheritance too;**
- **This is their church too;**
- For the church is not a building, but a group of people who believe in the power of God to transform lives;
- And whoever comes through those doors are welcome;
- To experience the same good news that our psalmist this morning is declaring;
- Happiness....
- Wholeness....
- New meaning and purpose....
- A hiding place of refuge;

- A chance to experience the freedom and deliverance that comes with being in a safe space; to be able to be spiritually pruned and nurtured;
- A chance to experience the steadfast love of God surrounding them without judgment;
- **We must remember to share** this opportunity for others to be able to return home and be welcomed with open arms;
- **We must remember that there** was a time where we too were deciding if it was ok for us to return back home;
- Oh saints this morning, let us learn from this story from our gospel this morning;
- Whether we identify with the older son or the younger son;
- **Let us remember** that we all have a share in this inheritance;
- So be glad in the Lord..be grateful in God's infinite grace and mercy....and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

- **Celebrate and rejoice, for those who was once dead but now has come to life; for those who have been lost but has now been found!**