

The Stuff that Makes Us Fruitful

Luke 13:1-9

I am not a farmer, nor am I much of a gardener, at least compared to many of you. Plants typically feel traumatized under my watchful care—some choosing outright suicide, evidenced by my annual planting of perennials around the parsonage.

It's odd, I suppose, growing up in Maine and I don't naturally possess a green thumb, since whatever isn't shoreline or woods up there is mostly farmland. My father always had a large garden and canning the harvest was the name of the game in our household ("You eat what you can and what you can't, you can!" as we used to say).

During the summers while in college, I worked for a church member's tree and landscaping business, where the closest I came to religious devotion was memorizing the name and description of every type of tree and shrub in the company book to impress the boss and his pastor. At the time, I envisioned myself as a budding Euell Gibbons, eager to hug a tree and get my daily dose of fiber from "wild hickory nuts" and pine needles.

Looking back now, I must admit, I had potential. I still take pride in my horticultural accomplishments, such as helping to plant the urban landscape of downtown Portland or dousing half the trees of coastal Maine with toxic insecticides and other EPA-banned substances. I even recall bravely battling the elements one summer day pruning shrubbery for customers during a tropical storm (which was not easy, mind you, though it did give the plantings a unique, Picasso-esque, trapezoidal appearance once the storm passed)!

Somewhere along the line, I lost my interest and skills in the horticultural arts. Invariably, it would have happened anyway by the time I

was living in Suffield where the local tobacco farmers would spread their fields in the early weeks of spring with truckloads upon truckloads of manure, which generated an odious air for the resident population and forced air traffic control at Bradley to divert planes away from rising plumes of methane gas (one spark could turn Tobacco Valley into a stogy!). There's something about stockpiles of freshly produced manure (or whatever you choose to call it) that sucked the desire for gardening right out of me.

Yet, I know there's a divinely-intended purpose for stuff like this. In nature's ceaseless composting, whatever goes in must come out and it does so in such a way to germinate the very birth of seeds and fertilize regeneration. People close to the earth, like farmers, gardeners, and sewage treatment operators, inherently know the pleasing attraction of fecal matter, which is why they cherish the stench of excrement unlike the rest of us who are more urbane and delicate, who don't appreciate its promise or gifts. However, we should, for what's natural to the earth's ecology is also true of the human spirit, i.e., the stuff that is often most offensive and odious to us in life is what helps generate something new and beneficial for us.

When I ponder it in these terms, I realize how frequently we're obligated to deal with all sorts of "excrement" of one type or another just to get through each day. We even have our favorite expressions— "#%&@ happens!", or "I've had enough of this [crap]", or "when the [poop] hits the fan...", and so forth. I'm sure you know them well. What we're expressing is a common complaint or annoyance whenever something terrible happens, or when we've had enough of life's miserable turns, or when something is about to blow up. *Stuff* happens! We all experience stuff like

this that leaves an odious stench that is usually hard to bear. Sometimes the stink is enough to lead you to utter despair.

Such thoughts of odious stuff remind me of a *New York Times* editorial published a few years ago written by a practicing Catholic who gave up his pew for Lent¹. I remember how struck I was by this commentary at the time because he was addressing something about his beloved Church that was driving him away from it. The writer noted his abandonment was only for a short time—a bit of Lenten housecleaning, so to speak—an opportunity to stand aside and address the deep feelings of despair in the hearts of many Catholics following the sudden resignation of Pope Benedict, leaving what the world has come to realize was a real mess at the Vatican and throughout the world over rampant sexual abuse by priests which has become the great apocalypse of the Roman Church in the 21st century. When this op-ed was published, the College of Cardinals had not yet met to elect Benedict’s successor, thus, the writer’s tone was of utter dismay:

Resignation: that’s what American Catholics are feeling about our faith. We are resigned to the fact that so much in the Roman Catholic Church is broken and won’t be fixed anytime soon. So if the pope can resign, we can, too. We should give up Catholicism *en masse*, if only for a time. ...We should seize this opportunity to ask what is true in our faith, what it costs us in obfuscation and moral compromise, and what its telos, or end purpose, really is. And we should explore other religious traditions, which we understand poorly. ²

We can understand, as many did, the deep Lenten angst this writer was expressing.

In the years since, this venerable and sacred institution good Catholics have loved and trusted for centuries has gone through its own

¹ Paul Elie, “Give Up Your Pew for Lent,” *New York Times*, Friday, March 1, 2013.

² Ibid.

self-imposed crisis of faith, being publicly exposed for “stuff” that stinks to the high heavens—something also found to be true in many other denominations and social institutions. When the “#%&@” hits the fan, it really covers a lot of territory with stench!

Perhaps, for that reason, it’s good to have a season like Lent to remind us of our human frailty, sinfulness, and need for repentance—the spiritual and behavioral *metanoia* that beckons people to wake up to reality, face what it is, and turn things around—to uncover and clean up the messes that stink. It’s not just institutional repentance that’s called for in our society (which clearly is warranted); there’s always an individual component to it as well, as we all may contribute through direct involvement or by sheer denial and avoidance.

What I mean is, when trouble comes or bad things occur, the initial impulse may be to deny it—defending the institutions we all have a stake in—the places we depend on for representing that which is good from our view—the people and the institutions we trust. When there’s personal or widespread denial, all energy and effort go into protecting and shielding the ones charged, while blaming the victims who rise up to make accusation. Blaming the victim is easy to do, since so much is at stake. But as a form of denial, it also prevents us from dealing with moral ugliness—the part of life that truly stinks (sexual abuse, rampant immorality, crude indecency, public corruption, malfeasance, bigotry, racism, violence, etc.). Since many situations are alarming, if not revolting, denial can be the first instinct that kicks in to avoid confronting the disgusting reality. Our desire is to flush this crap out of our consciousness and get on with life, assuming it will go away or we won’t have to deal with it. When “#%&@” happens, that’s TMI—too much information!

But Lent has a way of countering this. For one thing, we are called by the One we follow to the cross to be servants in this world, just like him. That may sound profoundly noble and spiritually honorable, but the last time I checked, those who are called servants in this world are precisely the ones who deal with the crap that others leave behind. Think about it. If someone makes a mess somewhere (public bathroom, hotel room, private or public places, etc.), who cleans it up? It's not those at the top of the food chain! Not at all. Servants bring the towels and mops, the sanitizing agents and the water to take care of the crap. Servants are assigned the task of cleaning up the excrement left behind.

So then, what does this imply, spiritually? What does it mean to be a servant like Christ other than to confront the nastiest aspects of life, whether its within us or within others, or in situations close to us or the “stench” from other places that offends us, that upsets or disgusts us, yet can no longer be dismissed or avoided?

That said, when we deal with the messes of human nature around us, we often discover another level of spiritual strength and wisdom within us, and certainly an appreciation of the meaning of divine love and mercy for the darkest misery of this world.

I sense this is the point we can take away from our gospel story. Luke 13 starts out with a couple of anecdotes (presumably of some local tragedies at the time) that Jesus was asked to explain—horrible things that needed some moral explanation (if not justification) for why they occurred. Then, it ends with a parable that suggests there is good use for all that “stuff” that repulses us in life.

Those who brought up such news to Jesus did so in ways mentioned earlier—by citing the headlines and then slandering the victims, blaming

them for their suffering and death, as if they brought it upon themselves for some reason. It is a classic cause-and-effect analysis that results in *blaming the victim*—harsh, shorthand assumptions people make when it comes to crimes and tragedy and they’re not directly involved (*If you don’t involve yourself in messy situations you won’t suffer such terrible consequences!*). This sounds like common sense, but it is too easy of an answer.

In our text, Jesus flushed this out by calling his audience on it, questioning them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”—meaning, *are you letting Pilate off the hook?* Think of how often we let “Pilate” off the hook when we blame victims to absolve those in positions of authority whom we like, trust, or depend upon (e.g., Presidents and other political leaders, teachers, public officials of all types, police officers, clergy, certain celebrities, etc.).

In both cases, Jesus dismissed their quick judgments and, in effect, told them, with this kind of moral logic and analysis, everyone should expect something horrible to happen to them, if a victim’s sin is always the underlying cause behind it. Who would be exempt? Simple moralisms of cause-and-effect—of human sin and divine punishment—are not only misleading and inadequate when applied to the tragedies of life, but they are cruel and unjust when they’re done to avoid holding the real culprits—the true offenders—accountable, even when there is little empathy for those whose lives are an absolute mess.

Then, Jesus told the parable of an unproductive fig tree planted in a vineyard that a landowner was going to cut down for being worthless. That is, until his gardener intervened and (rather than explaining that it was

stupid to plant a fig tree where grapevines would suck nutrients out of the soil) chose to fix the problem by fertilizing it with manure around its roots. In other words, rather than condemning the tree as fruitless and worthless, use the stuff that stinks to fertilize some new growth for another season. There's a lesson here. Yes, life can be a real pile of excrement at times, but use what stinks to provoke awareness, accountability, repentance, substantive behavioral change, and spiritual and social redemption. Instead of viewing people as worthless and expendable, let everything that stinks about them help generate some new possibilities and purpose that can be beneficial.

What could that mean? On a personal level, instead of viewing miserable "stuff" in life as toxic to your memory, ask: *how has it helped change me in a beneficial way? What have I learned or changed in my behavior?* Or, rather than writing people off, or demonizing offenders, empathize with their situation and misery, care about them, show mercy, and help them find a remedy to fix things! Be a servant (not merely a harsh critic or judge) in messy circumstances to help those who made the mess learn from it, to change their ways, and begin a more productive life. For if we are like Jesus, as servants of the world, we will feel compelled to face life's "#%&@" and get down into the filth and use it to nurture something good in people and in institutions that do harm.

That's a tall order, I realize; a very tall order. But think about it. Who else will be empathetically and redemptively motivated to clean things up—to not merely judge and condemn broken people and places—other than those who appreciate the value of redemption enough to serve others out of selfless love? Isn't that more fruitful and constructive—to turn human waste into something divinely wonderful?

Take what you want from these gardening tips. Apply them where you will. Though I still stink as a gardener, it's not lost on me the importance and value of feeding the roots for growth and pruning the things that harm the nature and shape of any tree or plant. That's Horticulture 101. May it also be Spiritual Wisdom 101 in the coming seasons of all our lives.

Along the way, may we realize what helps deliver us from the dirt and despair of human sin and suffering is usually the very stuff that brings us to that place. The only way out is, by the grace and love of God, to cultivate hope for moral insight and spiritual regeneration, even if its promise still lies buried below the surface.

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