

March 20, 2022
“God of Life . . . and Compost”
Isaiah 55:1-9 / Luke 13:1-9
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

We're now officially into spring, about 10 minutes ago or so. I know some of you are gardeners. I am not.

I have gardened at various times in my adult life, though not for a while – and not since we moved out to Lansdowne a few years ago. But I am not a gardener.

I belonged to a couple of community gardens when we still lived in the neighborhood. It was just me at first, having very little idea what I was doing. And it showed, as Jennine can attest. Without going into detail, let's just say I was basically kicked out of the first garden. But I did learn a few things along the way.

Then it was me and Amy, eventually with some help from Gabe, committing ourselves to a community garden plot down the street from our house. Still amateurs, for sure, but it was and IS amazing what good can come even when you don't really know what you're doing, amen?! Intention counts for something.

Our energy for the constant work ebbed and flowed, especially when we got to those soupy Philadelphia summers. I'm proud to say that we had some productive seasons, enjoying and sometimes sharing the delicious fruits of our labor. I particularly remember growing lima beans one year that were the best I ever tasted, and I LOVE lima beans.

We also had some not-so-productive seasons. Seasons where the insects or squirrels or our waning energy and commitment left us with little to show for our efforts.

Regardless, we faithfully gathered our food scraps at home to add to the compost pile at the garden, so even in those more frustrating seasons, it was always satisfying to know that at least our failed efforts would contribute to the compost pile and eventually support the collective cause. From death to life. Repeated, again and again.

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Why indeed?

These are words from the prophet known to us as Isaiah, though scholars tell us that the book of Isaiah is really a composite work, a collection of several different prophets operating at different periods in Israel's history.

In this case, the prophet is likely addressing an Israelite community during the Babylonian exile of the 6th century BCE. A community very much in the wilderness.

And so these words – like the ongoing thread of prophetic witness before and after – calling them to repentance, which we know is simply the act of turning back, again and again and again, toward God, toward each other, toward ourselves. From fear to love. From death to life.

In the midst of what surely felt more like death to the Israelites, calling THEM back to love and life, to that which is essential, life-giving.

“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”

“Why do you spend your money for that which is NOT bread, and your labor for that which does NOT satisfy?”

Research, and frankly, experience, tells us that the average American is exposed to somewhere between 4,000 and 10,000 ads every day, in one form or another.

Our consumeristic, materialistic, capitalist culture breeds DISSATISFACTION. It fosters anxiety and fear. What we have is NOT enough. Who we are is NOT enough. And so, in conscious or subconscious pursuit of manufactured and insatiable needs we didn't even know we had, we end up spending our money – if we even have it to spend, given that capitalism, of course, also breeds poverty; we end up spending our money, individually and collectively, on that which is not bread, and our labor on that which does not satisfy. We lose sight of what ACTUALLY satisfies, what is actually enough. For us, and for us all.

There's a story of unknown origin called, "The Quail's Song." It goes like this:

Once a hunter spied a flock of quail who were feasting in the tall grass at the edge of the forest. With one swift movement he had caught them all in his net. He took the birds home and put them in a cage at the back of his house. The poor birds walked around and around the cage crying and crying. But whenever the man came and tossed in seeds they greedily pecked them up. All but one bird, that is. There was one bird in the cage who refused to eat, and grew thinner and thinner.

At last the day came when the man planned to bring the fattened birds to the market to sell. He looked carefully into the cage inspecting the quality of his flock. When he noticed the thin bird, he opened the cage and took it out to examine it more closely.

"Why, you're nothing but bones," he said. No sooner had he spoken than the bird flew from his hand to the safety of a branch just out of his reach.

The other birds looked at their free sister and cooed sadly. The free bird sang sadly back, "You ate your captor's food and soon you will die. I refused my captor's food, and now I am free."

Of course we're all gonna die eventually, but what would it mean, what would it take, for us – individually and collectively – to stop settling for the seeds of our caged, consumer, capitalist culture and FREE ourselves and each other to live? To stop settling for that which will never satisfy and attune and re-attune ourselves and each other to what is ESSENTIAL, to what is ENOUGH? In order that we, and WE ALL, may simply live, as the God of life intends? More deeply. More holistically. More abundantly.

"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy," Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

God, who is the very source of life, our lives, all life, calls us, again and again and again, back to abundant life.

Which brings us to the gospel text from Luke.

Jesus, continuing Isaiah's prophetic thread, is also talking about the need for repentance. He's challenging the conventional, theological understanding among Pharisees and other religious authorities of the day, that physical, even material, suffering was the consequence of sin. That those who suffered simply got what they deserved, punished for their sin. An absurd and heartless line of thinking that continues, for example, with the conservative political and social trope that those who are poor get what they deserve because they have not worked hard enough. Punished for their sin.

Jesus would and did, of course, excoriate such thinking. He would say, "We're in this together." Social sin operates like individual sin and so requires collective repentance. And so back to our reading, he challenges these religious authorities, beginning with reference to two specific calamities not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, but presumably familiar to his audience.

"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you: but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or 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? No, I tell you: but unless you repent; you will all perish just as they did."

Jesus is not talking here about physical death; again, we're all gonna die. He's talking about spiritual death, about dying while living. About, if you will, spending MONEY for that which is not bread and LABOR for that which does not satisfy.

Again, repentance being the act of turning toward God, each other, ourselves, toward love and therefore life. That which is life-giving. Toward that which IS bread, and that which DOES satisfy. Abundant life.

Unless you repent, unless you turn back from death to life, unless – as he says elsewhere – you die to yourselves to make way for the divine life within and through you, you will

perish while yet living. We all will. Social sin requires collective repentance. We're in this together. If one suffers, we all suffer. If one perishes, we all perish.

Jesus goes on, as he so often does, to use a parable to take his point further. A parable meant to give us deeper insight into who God is and what God's kingdom is like.

You heard it. A man plants a fig tree, and when he later comes looking for its fruit, again and again over a period of three years, he finds none. Not one fig. So he tells his gardener to cut it down. "Why should it be WASTING the soil?" What good is a fig tree with no figs.

But the gardener encourages patience, and offers nourishment. "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."

This is not an "OR ELSE" story about punishment and death. It's an "AND SO" story about compassion and life! The threat of death, the threat of being cut down, is meant to inspire urgency, not fear. Life is short, don't waste it on that which does not bear fruit. On that which is not bread, which does not satisfy.

The metaphorical fig tree that produces no figs is not hopeless, it's just not healthy. It requires nurturing, rich soil, manure, compost. The God of LIFE from the beginning is the God who enables and desires life ongoing, life abundant. There is already enough built into the fabric of creation.

God is not the impatient man who planted the fig tree, eager to cut it down; God is the constant gardener. God is, in fact, the manure, the soil, the compost. The One who turns even waste, that which is dead, into life.

As some gardener once wrote, "The soil is miraculous. It is where the dead are brought back to life."

And as any of you who are gardeners or farmers or just committed to composting know, and as urban gardener Kyle Mitchell reminds us, "Compost is created out of what most would consider waste: food scraps, newspaper, hair clippings, wood shavings, dead

leaves, etc. With the help of bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms . . . these lifeless materials are broken down and brought back to life. This process is part of the ongoing creation of the world, a creation that values everything, uses everything, transforms everything. Nothing is wasted. Nothing. Is. Wasted. . . . compost is 'resurrection in a bucket.'"

The God of life, the God of compost, calls us back – constantly, continually – from death to life. There is always one more day, one more year, one more opportunity to turn again toward that which is life-giving. To turn again and again and again toward love and life, toward abundance and wholeness and well-being, for ourselves and for each other.

To join the Constant Gardener in the ongoing, compassionate work of turning, cultivating, tilling life's soil, where the dead are brought back to life. Getting our hands dirty, giving our labor to what enables life, new life, life more nourishing, life more abundant. Giving our labor, our money, our lives to that which satisfies.

"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."

May it be so.