

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent: Luke 13:1-9

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Nothing gets my mother more excited than a big pile of manure. Perhaps I should back up. See, my mother is a gardener. Everywhere we've lived, she's put in gardens. They're sort of her way of taking what little sliver of the world she lives on and making it a bit more beautiful. At least, that's what it looks like from the outside. She loves the beauty of it all, and the end product - if such a thing really exists for a gardener - the end product certainly is beautiful.

Whenever I go visit, we pick up our old, nightly ritual. Just before the sun sets and while dinner's simmering away on the stove, we go out and "check crops." In the first home I really remember, this was a relatively quick process. Step out front, pop some snapdragon seed pods; step out back, laugh at Elvis the Cat getting into the catnip, and that was it. Call it a night. But with each move, crop checking grew. One garden out front and another out back just didn't cut it anymore. The mailbox needed some floral embellishment, and that bare corner at the edge of the road, well, and of course, that tough to mow area under the trees or by the guest-room window or stretching across half the backyard. Mom had a problem. Once the gardening seed was planted, it took root in her soul, and when it found purchase, up it grew. She's the kind of person that claims she doesn't have a green thumb while seedlings sprout from under her nails. No joke, my mother tries to kill things and they still find a way to grow. Not even death and decay can slow her down.

Checking crops these days has become quite the workout. There's hills and bending and squatting and stretching, all punctuated with "Oh looks!" here and "tut tuts" there. You can't check crops without walking back into the house laden with squashes and carrots and tomatoes and, believe it or not even this time of year, flowers for the table. But in all that growth and life and hope, my mom's prized garden feature is a big, literally steaming pile of rot. Garden clippings, dead leaves, banana peels, even old cardboard gets heaped over in a corner. My mother's compost pile is the stuff of legend, as is the magical stuff that comes out of it. All that cast-off garbage a tiny and literal landfill brewing away, doing the silent work of breaking down. Most folks would think of the compost pile as an eyesore or even a nose-sore. But not my mom. She'll brag on that pile as much as anything she grows, because she knows its power: the power to turn an eggshell into a bearded iris.

She may deny having a green thumb, but my mom's proud of what she calls her brown thumb. When I was littler, I remember going to my uncle's farm and loading up trash cans full of cow manure. I racked my brain that day, trying to remember what awful thing I'd done to deserve this punishment and was horrified when I realized I wasn't in trouble. Mom and I were doing an activity together, and she was enjoying this! We loaded up hundreds of pounds of cow patties in the trunk of our Toyota Corolla, held shut with straining bungee cords, and mom sheepishly asked me not to tell my stepdad that she'd used the good car to haul our precious load. That poor car. That was only the first of many trips it made out to my uncle's farm. Back at home, I carried trash can after trash can to mom, stationed with a pitchfork and a grin at the edge of the compost pile, and as I tumped over the cans she worked in the manure with the rest of the compost. I gotta admit, and I know this sounds weird, but that slurry of rot and manure smelled incredible. I know. But it really did. And whenever the wind shifts just right here and I catch a noseful of the dairy farms or Mosher's spreading fertilizer, y'all that's home.

And I swear, wherever my mom moves, she brings a little of that rot and manure compost pile along with her -- like a sourdough starter, the compost pile's mother -- a wad of nothing much to look at full of nutrients and bacteria and other yummy things plants crave. And once it's introduced, her compost piles work their magic. Junk goes in, spongy black miracle gro comes out. And y'all, while her gardens are always a treat

to see, next time you're in Arkansas, swing by and check out her compost pile. It is a thing of beauty, complete with its own growth and life and hope.

There's something very Lenten in all this, something that mirrors even our whole year. We live and grow and learn and die. But each death doesn't bring about the end. Death brings about an end, a decay of some sort that carries with it the ingredients for new life. And when the time comes, new life sprouts. And we live, and we grow, and we learn, and sometimes, sometimes we die. I think Easter wants us in the garden, checking crops. And Ordinary Time wants us out mowing the lawn. But Lent, Lent wants us tilling the compost pile with pitchfork in hand with the remnants of little deaths piled up but not discarded. Held and cared for and cherished even, with the hope that even out of this unsightly heap, good and beauty and maybe even fruit will come.

But here's what I really love. In this parable Jesus tells, this cycle hasn't done much yet. Three years on, the owner's seen the process go and go but no fruit comes. He's done with the whole cycle thing. It hasn't worked for me yet, so why bother? But leave it to the wisdom of a gardener. Give it another year. Give it more time and more care and more of that death and rot, and we'll see. We'll see what happens. And that's where it ends! Nothing more. We don't even find out if it works! We're left standing there with the uncertainty of the gardener, satisfied in the unknown with pitchfork in hand.

Y'all, I wonder. I wonder what the conversation is next year. Does the gardener give in? Or does he ask for another year? And the next, another year. And the next, another year still. Once more 'round the cycle, living and growing and learning and dying. Another year, year after year, a thing of beauty, full of growth and life and hope.