**Moving Forward: Ready to Grow** (Lent Three) – Luke 13:1-9.

Well Spring in Canada seems to be marked by excitement of the removal of snow tyres. But, growing up in England, Spring was one of my favorite seasons. By early March we could usually see the daffodils beginning to bloom, the crocuses offering their display of various colours – and one of my favorite Spring shrubs was the bright yellow Forsythia.

When I came to Canada and finally bought a house and had a garden, I wanted to plant one of those bright shrubs that heralded in Spring. But I soon found out that in the colder climates of Canada, Forsythia needs to be planted in a sunny location – and my first house just did not have that. We were surrounded by large mature trees, which made for a cool and shady back yard – but not a good place to plant forsythia.

But, I did not give up. As soon as we moved to our present house, with a south facing back yard, and I began to design a garden – forsythia was one of the first plants I placed in the ground. I actually planted two of them! And that first year, I was so happy to see them bloom with their bright yellow flowers and long green stems. And they did really well - for about 2- 3 years! Then I noticed that although they were green and bushy – the plants had fewer and fewer flowers on them. What was I doing wrong?

Well, I don’t know how many of you gardeners out there listen to Ed Lawrence’s gardening program on the CBC – but he is a source of wisdom. I learnt that I was literally limiting the growth of my plants by not cutting them back enough. As soon as the shrub is finished flowering in late Spring, I was supposed to cut it back so that I could encourage new growth and flowers next year. And I also learned that it was not to be a gentle pruning – I was to severely cut out all the long stems, and to prune the branches right down.

I have to admit that I was a little dubious when I cautiously began with the pruning shears. But I cut back my two plants, and that year they went from about 4 feet tall, to just under 2 feet tall. I wondered if I had killed them! Only time would tell.

But next Spring – imagine my joy when both my forsythia shrubs had more flowers and colour on them than ever before.

The Parable of the Fig Tree is a story about encouraging new growth.

Scholars generally agree that Jesus is likely making a connection between the fig tree and the nation of Israel – he is warning Israel again to change before it is too late. He is giving them one more chance to ‘produce fruit’. It’s a warning that he has given again and again throughout his ministry. And as Jesus knows he is coming to the end of his ministry – his warnings become more strident. Israel is to bear fruit, or she will be destroyed!

But, the parable has clear implications still today.

It raises the question of ‘Is God displeased with the lack of fruit in our lives?’

And what are the consequences of God’s displeasure with us?

It’s a disturbing parable because it preaches division. We like to think of Jesus as the voice of unity, the peace maker, but here Jesus is clearly the Great Divider. He is sorting through humanity, while saying that others will be turned away.

He is warning that there is a consequence if we do not change.

The call to change is a fundamental backbone of Luke’s gospel. Last week we were reflecting on ways that the greater church needs to change to be more inclusive and welcoming.

Today, the call is more personal.

We have to decide which side we personally are on – do we produce fruit or not?

If we know that there is something that is stopping us from truly walking with God –and let’s call it what it is – ‘sin!’ If we know that there is a sin that we are holding onto that is preventing us from bearing fruit– then we are called to change!

We are called to ‘repent.’ And that’s not a word that we commonly preach on in the United Church.

Theologian Dr.Darrell Bock writes:

*“repentance is not merely an emotion …. To repent is not merely to regret the things we have done or to apologize for them, or even to recognize that a wrong has been committed. To repent is to agree that a change of direction is required, and then respond accordingly.*”

Think about that for a moment.

‘To repent is to agree that a change of direction is required, and we are called to respond accordingly!’

This is not just a message for Lent, it is something that we should always think about. But in this season, we are perhaps called more deeply into reflection. To ponder on what is stopping us from growing in our faith journeys. I invite you to think about that right now.

* Perhaps it is a broken relationship that you know you need to work to repair.
* Maybe it is personal grudge that you hold onto, and for some reason are just unable to forgive.
* Or perhaps you know that you are simply not allowing time in your busy day to spend time with God – time in prayer, time in devotion, time in reading God’s word.
* And maybe deep down, you recognize that there are times when you truly do not act out what you know you believe? Times when you have missed an opportunity to be compassionate. Times when you have been full of criticism and self-righteousness.

What is it that is stopping you from bearing fruit for God’s kingdom?

In Luke 3 we hear of John the Baptist calling for us to *‘bear fruit of repentance’* (Luke 3:8),

What do you need to repent in order to grow, and to bear fruit?

As people of faith, we know that the good news is that when we do truly seek forgiveness - when we truly desire to change and to walk more closely with God - then we are blessed by God’s amazing Grace. We are given the chance to be fruitful.

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he reminds them that they are

*“created in Christ Jesus to do good things.*  (that) *God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives”.* (Ephesians 2:10)

And in his letter to Titus, he writes that through grace we are

*“…educated so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world.”* (Titus 2:12)

When we know and experience God’s grace – we know deep down that it is right for us to respond with fruitfulness.

And God helps us by giving us everything that we need to grow.

Just like the sunflower seeds were planted in good soil, watered, and given sunlight – we too have all of that to help us grow.

Just like the gardener in the parable offers to take care of the plant and feed it fertilizer – we too are loved, and cared for, and given all we need to produce fruit.

We have God’s word that we can study.

We have a community of faith in which we can support each other.

We have the opportunity to bring everything to God in prayer.

We know that we do not walk alone.

And so, in this season of Lent – and this time of Spring and new growth – are you ready to grow?

Let me encourage you to let go of the things that are stopping you from growing into what God intended you to be.

Prune back the dead and straggling branches holding you back – enrich yourself with fertilizer from God - so you too can bear bright yellow flowers, and plentiful fruit.

Amen.