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Rev. Laura Blazek

There are many words that I never expected to use in a sermon and manure is one them.

But Jesus' parable about the barren fig tree started me pondering about manure. Now, I'm sure Deacon Nancy has all sorts of funny stories about manure that she could share. Most of my manure stories come from veterinary school which one of my Iona classmates politely pointed out probably weren't meant to be shared from the pulpit on a Sunday morning.

However, I like to garden and those stories I can share. When I lived in St. Louis we had two huge lilac bushes next to the house. In fact they were part of what attracted me to the property in the first place. When we first toured the house the lilacs were heavily burdened with purple flowers putting off a heady scent. But our first year in the house the lilacs produced only a few scattered blooms. Disappointed, I headed out to the garden store determined that next year the lilacs would be bursting with blooms. I came home with numerous bags of manure and began the laborious process of spreading it around the bushes. And then I waited. The following spring my lilacs were filled with an abundance of sweet smelling flowers. They just needed food to grow into what they were called to be.

When we moved to Norman the soil around our house was fairly poor- plants would be all scraggly or not grow at all. We tilled the soil, added compost and manure, tilled some more and then we waited. The next year we did the same- till, add compost and manure, till some more and then wait. It took several years of this process for the soil to become rich enough for plants to grow strong so that they could produce the flowers, vegetables, and fruits that they were expected to produce. Enriching soil and cultivating plants so that they can grow into what they are called to be takes time, patience, and hard work.

Not long after we moved to Norman my mom died. She had a plant called Joseph's Coat that she had nurtured and cared for since, well, forever it seemed like. It was a cutting from the original plant that grew at her childhood home. She always told me it was a rare variety that even a professor from OU back in the 60's drove all the way from Norman to Big Canyon, Oklahoma just to get a cutting from my grandmother's plant. Just before she died one of her final requests was that my brother and I would keep the family heirloom plant alive. No pressure right? As a side note, don't ever do that to your kids.

Caring for this plant meant transplanting into the flower bed in spring where it would spread, grow new strong stems and roots and provide delightful color. But it couldn't survive the winter outside which meant digging up a portion of it, transplanting it to a pot, and keeping it in a sunny location and watered frequently until we could plant it outside again come spring. We both kept our respect plants alive for several years. My plant died when I failed to get it inside before a freeze. I kept meaning to bring it in but the distractions of daily life kept me putting off the care

of this plant until tomorrow- weeks of ‘I’ll do it tomorrow’. My brother’s plant died when the daily distractions of his life resulted in a failure to keep up with the watering. They died, not because of any shortcoming on the plants part, but because we failed to provide the basic necessities of life- shelter, food, and water.

To reach their full potential, plants like my lilacs, my mother’s Joseph Coat, and the barren fig tree need care and nurture. Our human bodies and souls aren’t all that different. For us to become what God has called us to be we need care and nurture. We need the basics- food, shelter, and clean water to drink. But we also need manure in the metaphorical sense- love, encouragement, a sense of belonging, feeling safe, support, trust, hope, faith, peace, and more love. And that means we need each other. God may have planted the seed, Jesus caused us to sprout, but it is us mere humans working with the power of the Holy Spirit and with God’s help that nurture our growth so that we can become that person that God created us to be, so that we can love ourselves so that we can love others as God created us to do.

Today, we will baptize Lacey as a fellow member of the body of Christ. But we are all being asked to make a commitment to help Lacey grow into the full stature of Christ. That means being present with her in this Church. That means accepting her for who she is and encouraging her in her endeavors. That means teaching her about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That means showing her that love, hope, and faith are more powerful than hate and fear. It takes a community to raise a child and it takes a community to raise a Christian, regardless of age, because the care and nurture of God’s people is Christ’s call to all of us.

We make a commitment to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. As St. Francis is supposed to have said, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” Every day think about what kind of message your words and actions say about Christ. For many people their first contact with Christ isn’t through the Church it is through you.

We make a commitment to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. After all, that is what Christ commands us to do. When you look at someone else what do you see? Do you see a fellow child of God and the face of Christ or do you see a fellow competitor for the resources of this world? Do you see a fellow child of God and the face of Christ or do you see someone that isn’t worthy of sharing space with you on this planet because they are different from you? Do you see a fellow child of God and the face of Christ or do you see someone that deserves to suffer? Do you even see them at all? Christ calls us to love all persons- the sick, the hungry, the homeless, those in prison, the destitute, the oppressed, those in trouble, and all those others that we prefer to pretend don’t exist because they remind us that it could be us that are invisible.

We make a commitment to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. But what is dignity really? Donna Hicks at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University who has written a whole book about dignity says this:

“Dignity is our inherent value and worth as human beings.... We are born invaluable, priceless, and irreplaceable...[there is a] human desire to be treated as something of value...[we are held together by] mutual recognition of the desire to be seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly; to be recognized, understood, and to feel safe in the world. When our identity is accepted and we feel included, we are granted a sense of freedom and independence and a life filled with hope and possibility.”

She really hit the nail on the head. As a child of God we are invaluable, priceless, and irreplaceable. We are worthy of love and we all matter. When we surround each other with metaphorical manure- - love, encouragement, a sense of belonging, feeling safe, support, trust, hope, fair treatment, things that motivate and inspire faith- and when we help to provide the basic needs of life- shelter, food, and clean water to drink- our lives become one in which we can actually bear fruit and become who God has created us to be.

Today, as we pray for Lacey as she receives the Sacrament of new birth let us also pray for ourselves that we are delivered from the way of sin and death; that our hearts are open to Christ's grace and truth; that we are filled with the holy and life-giving Spirit; that we will keep the faith and communion of God's holy Church; that we learn to love others in the power of the Spirit; that we will go out into the world as witnesses to God's love; that we will be brought to the fullness of Christ's peace and glory.

May we who share Christ's Body, live his risen life; we who drink his cup, bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world.

Amen.