

Sermon, Church as Lemonade Stand
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 3.23.25

I have a lemon tree that produces lemons larger than grapefruits. We bought the tree shortly after we moved to Florida (six years ago). Technically, it's a lemon bush. It's designed to grow inside of a large pot perfect for an enclosed patio area. We put it in the oversized pot and watered it but it did not produce. I warned it that if there is no fruit in a year I'm moving it outside of the enclosed patio and it will have to fend for itself. I then dug around the soil a bit, put fertilizer on it and the next year... no fruit. A year later, I removed the tree/bush from the gigantic pot, dug a hole outside of our enclosed pool, and planted it next to the fence and some other bushes. Wouldn't you know it, within six months, it was producing these gigantic lemons.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus gives the Parable of the Fig Tree in which a landowner told the gardener to remove a fig tree that was not producing. The gardener said that he will dig around the tree, fertilize it, and, if the tree doesn't produce next year, he will tear it out.

The way I read this parable, we – humans – are the fig tree. It's an analogy that comes from the Old Testament. We, humans, are called to bear good fruit. The New Testament certainly ran with this analogy. Have you ever wondered why humans are compared to trees? It's because we can't transplant ourselves. We can't prune ourselves. We can't fertilize ourselves. We need a gardener to do it. God/Jesus is the good gardener.

Speaking of the Old Testament, one proverb comes to mind: The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life (11:30). Righteous is another way of saying "generous". Being generous, like a tree with its shade and its fruit, is the way of living and life. It seems as if my lemon tree is being quite generous with the size of its fruit.

Here's another way to look at it. Our opening prayer begins with a major tenant of the Christian faith: *Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.* That's an unpopular idea in North America. We like to think, and act, like we have power in ourselves to help ourselves. We like to lift up ourselves with our bootstraps. We like the image of the cowboy on the open range who can set his own life and live where (and how) he wants to live. But, spiritually speaking, we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves. We are doomed to our own devices and desires. Our brains were made to be interdependent upon one another and dependent upon our Good Gardener. One of the ways, spiritually speaking, that we cannot help ourselves is with pruning. I pruned and replanted that lemon tree and then it produced fruit. The tree/bush could not do it on its own. ... just like us. We depend on God, and we are interdependent on one another.

This morning, before we heard our opening prayer – *we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves, protect us outwardly and inwardly that we may be defended from adversities and from thoughts that can hurt our soul* – we were reminded that Jesus commands us to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We then asked God to forgive us because we have not loved God with all our heart and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves and that we are truly sorry and humbly repent, and, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord, to please forgive us, create us new and help us to walk in God's ways.

It feels good every Sunday when we get to do this. It's our pruning. We can't do it ourselves – although we know the words and could, I suppose if we really wanted to (but we don't or won't because we have no power in ourselves...) – we are interdependent on each other, and our church, to remind us, weekly, to be pruned. That pruning, like the lemon tree, produces good fruit.

We can't fertilize ourselves. We need the gardener to do it. One area of fertilization is our minds. The mind is a vast garden that, if directed, can bear good fruit; it requires, however, The Gardener.

Before the Parable of the Fig Tree, Jesus asked what people think when bad things happen to others. They thought what we, deep in the back of our minds, think and that is bad things happen to bad people. Jesus talked about a construction accident where the Tower of Siloam fell and killed eighteen workers. He asked,

“Were they worse sinners than you all because they died that way? No, but unless you “metanoia” you too will perish as they did.”

You notice that I put the Greek word in. *Meta* means beyond. *Noia* means mind, or the process of our mind. Thus, “beyond-think-mind” is a close English equivalent of that word. Some scholars have written that it's like out-of-the-box-thinking. Get out of your own mind; go beyond, and there you will experience God. I think Jesus was trying to change their minds. We know that unfortunately bad things happen to good people. And we know that good things happen to bad people too. Jesus is calling us to *metanoia*; to change our minds, to turn them to God. *Metanoia* is fertilizer for the mind to bear good fruit. We need the Gardener to invite us to go beyond what we are thinking. As trees, the Gardener is calling us to go beyond normal tree like behavior and to be generous and bear fruit.

Back to the lemon tree, I've been thinking about the tree and the Church and All Angels in particular. How does this parable apply to our spiritual, interdependent lives with each other at church? The way this building was beautifully constructed, the stained-glass window above the altar shows Jesus standing in water. Like the image of the water that pours down like righteousness (from the prophet Amos), figuratively, and architecturally speaking, Jesus is standing in the water and that water flows down through the cross above the altar (which has a blue background that matches the window), it flows down onto the floor (which has blue carpet) and out the doors into the baptismal font that you all walked past as you entered the church. The water flows from Jesus, down the cross and altar and flows with us out to the font and then out into our island community (where we are literally surrounded by water).

The prophet Jeremiah said that those who follow the Lord are like a tree that is planted by a spring of water. When the summer comes, it will still have green leaves. The Gardener has planted us here at All Angels. The spring of water, spiritually speaking, is flowing past Jesus, through the altar and out into the world. The world, which, spiritually speaking seems to be in a drought right now, means that our leaves remain green even in our day and time. Our Gardener has planted this church and us to receive the water flowing from Jesus.

One more thing about lemons, there's another proverb (although I have not been able to find it in the Bible) that goes as follows: when life gives you lemons, make lemonade. The role of church, with the spring of living water that keeps our leaves green even in the middle of a drought, is that we love and support one another. Trees are interdependent upon each other. Scientists are proving how trees "communicate" with each other in the forest across species. They depend on one another. And so do we. We communicate with each other the good things in life and the bad. This church in the past year has had a wedding, we're having a baptism today, and we've had funerals. We're there to celebrate and to mourn together. To hold each other up and to support one another in friendship and love. Here, at All Angels, when life gives you a lemon, we work together to make lemonade. When someone asks what is All Angels to our community, I suppose we could say, we're a lemonade stand for those who are thirsty for the love of God and neighbor.