

# Feeding Our Spiritual Life

March 7, 2010

St. Paul's - Richmond United Church

Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-9

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

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Many commentators have said the Olympics created a new sense of ourselves as Canadians. Some have said it worked as religious function, giving us an identity. Those who study the chemistry of the brain suggest that religion gives us sense of calm and awe. Purpose comes out of that inner sense of wellbeing. It is this sense of creating a shared experience that made the Olympics what it was, a form of civil religion.

This suggests a question. What should we give ourselves over to? Is it life affirming and life transforming? In the religious world of Lent, we are asked to examine our lifestyles and values. In the examination of what we commit ourselves to, as a society and as individuals, we are asked to let go of those things that inhibit our collective wellbeing.

The question becomes, "Why do we persist in spending our available good or energy on that which has no ability to satisfy our deep hunger?" How do we discern what to let go? Lent is a time of reflection that helps us discern and find the religious impulse for the common good and well being of all. Lent is a time of hunger - hunger for truth telling and a genuine repentance that flows from such truth telling, and hunger for forgiveness from One who knows the truth about us but who nevertheless comes to us with the offer of amazing Grace. (E. Clarke)

In our world we have been offered two ideas that are in tension. One is those who consider themselves realists. The other idea is found in those who consider themselves idealists or visionaries. No part of life is untouched by this tension. It seems we are always being called to choose between these two ways of approaching life.

We hear it in the phrase "hard nosed." "Be realistic, don't waste your time on what appears to be a useless institution." "Count the losses and move on," is a mantra of our times. In times of conflict the realistic answer is, "We may have to do this evil to achieve a better good." Most of us are affected by this philosophy and often live out of it.

There is unease about this view. Can we be too realistic? Are we losing something of value when we let go of visionary and idealistic world views. In response there is an appeal to finding a vision and letting it help

transcend the limits of what is. It sees itself as an antidote to realism. In a sense that is what happened in the Olympics.

Lent is a time to explore a deeper way, the insights of the Christian way. It is the way of the pragmatic visionary. We don't have to sacrifice one perspective for the other. In seeking the truth about reality we discover we need both hope for the future and a realistic assessment of the situation. We discover a trust in and realistic assessment of our skills so we can transform the future. We need vision that makes a difference to our lived experience. That vision is always expanding when it is tested by the light of God who is at work in the hard headed world.

Parables are a way that Jesus used to turn things upside down. They function to call into question conventional wisdom by the wisdom of the kingdom of God. The hearer is challenged and unexpected learning come out of the hearing.

This fig tree story begins a series of parables that are reversal stories. This story of the fig tree is one that any who farm or garden or do any visionary work knows. It seems straight forward.

Fig trees are important food source and they also have symbolic value. A fruitful fig tree is a sign of blessing and the barren tree is a sign of curse or judgement.

It is clear from the beginning of the story there is no hope for the tree. Years have been spent trying to get the tree to produce. Now it has become counterproductive. So a realistic farmer would cut it down. The story is set up for us to agree to this assessment. The listeners would have said amen. Good farmers know there is a limit.

However, the response is counter to what one would expect from a tree so hopelessly barren. "Lets work some manure into the ground and hope it will produce." Give it one more year. Ah-hah, the visionary, the one who keeps hoping that there will be a transformation. The response is - both pragmatic and visionary - they are combined.

This is the view of the Kingdom of God, the future - the vision - is always open, and it is to be tested in daily existence - by pragmatic outcomes. Hope helps revise our acting. Our acting expands our vision. It is not either/or as a way of being. It is both/and.

To gain that perspective is the Lenten journey of prayer. In lent we learn to pray unceasingly. By that I mean - our living is a prayer. All that we do is a form of prayer. Our living is based in a prayer life. Our wisdom is transformed when we pray. We increase our co-creation with God through prayer. Everything is a prayer.

However, one of the struggles contemporary Christians have is, what is the meaning of prayer? Sometimes the negative helps get at the positive. Prayer is not gimme gimme. Prayer is not expecting some magical outcome. Prayer is not a time of bargaining. Some expect a personal phone call from God to explain what one is to do. Too many are stuck there, waiting for the phone call. Prayer is more. It is a real encounter where we get a wider vision.

Prayer is both a personal and communal act. It matters. There is the power many voices and actors. It takes more than one to have a big influence. Prayer is a form of persuasive power.

Prayer functions to help us be in harmony with the force of love. We pray to be in the image of Jesus. When we are in harmony, the vision expands-our realism is wider. Prayer helps us to increase our spiritual vision. We take in more. Prayer opens our eyes to the activity of God in every moment.

Prayer supports us and others in their vocation of love. When we pray for others -in a world that is created by relationships-prayer is felt in others. When we know others are there for us, we have more vision - more strength to live the vision. Prayer helps us focus. Being quiet in prayer helps us focus on the issues around us. In the quiet of reflection, we can sort out the needs of the moment that will help the future be.

Prayer that is deep calls us to play - to play in the world, with others who seek the beauty, the beauty swirling through the night sky. Yes, there is light, breaking through, there in the barren ground, see the flower, the beauty. We sing the night away knowing that this fragile vessel we call the church does ring with beauty, shouts out loud there is more, dig deeper, sing louder.

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