

HOLY HUMUS

Lent 3 – Cycle C: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

When we moved into our present house 21 years ago, there really wasn't much landscaping on anyone's lot, including ours. Wilmot Township, however, made sure each lot had a tree planted about 1 ½ metres back from the road. We knew that these solitary trees would, in time, provide a leafy buffer from passing traffic and soften what was, in 1992, a visually rugged terrain. With great faith and industry, each new homeowner started creating gardens and planting bushes. We were no exception, but the results, even after a full year, were anything but dramatic. Our soil was poor; there were water shortages each summer; we knew it would take time before our street no longer had that new subdivision look.

One of our neighbours was having amazing results, however. Their flowers always appeared robust and colourful, and they planted a weeping conifer on their front yard that seemed to double its size over night. I asked Pirette what the secret was, and without missing a beat she said, "Oh, Ralph brings home manure from his parents' farm and spreads it under our trees and mixes it in with the soil in all our gardens. It makes a big difference." I thought about the trunk loads of compost and topsoil I had brought home from Meadow Acres, and the several bins of black earth I had brought home from the Erb Street landfill site on Compost Give-Away Day. None of it seemed to matter, especially to our pathetic Township tree. I realized what we really needed was a horse or a cow with a healthy appetite and a good digestive system.

A few years later, our Youth Minister, Alicia, and I were returning to Kitchener-Waterloo from Camp Edgewood in Eden Mills. We had gone for a pre-Confirmation Camp meeting, and on the way there I had noticed on the road which runs from Eramosa to Eden Mills that a farmer was selling something in feedbags by the side of the road. I could see a sign, but we had to wait until the return trip to see what it said. You can imagine my delight when we pulled over and I was finally able to read "manure for sale; \$5 per bag; proceeds go to send my children to camp." The bags were huge and heavy: Alicia and I managed to get two into the trunk of my car. To make a long story short, our Colorado Blue Spruce shot up that year, our flowers and veggies were the best ever. For whatever reason, though, our Township tree remained pathetic, and was eventually replaced.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his own garden story, and yes, there's even a pathetic tree and reference to manure. It's a parable, Luke tells his readers, a parable, it seems, about repentance; turning away from those things that separate us from God and our neighbour, and turning towards God and our neighbour by allowing the gospel to enter our hearts and minds and direct our actions. The gospel, living in God's way, is the holy humus, the manure (if you will) that can change us from being like the pathetic fig tree to a fig tree that bears fruit. What the parable illustrates, along with the other two teachings of Jesus in the same reading, is the urgency of actually doing something with our lives. To be people of God is a high calling, Jesus teaches; and he calls us to live according to our high calling – to bear fruit, in other words. And, in fact, all three of our readings today call the faithful to make good choices in responding to the grace they have received; the grace we have received.

One of the things I have learned from Alicia in watching her develop programming for our youth is the need always to include a service component in the roster of activities in which they engage. When our youth come together, they do those things we expect would happen: they enjoy one another's company and have fun; they play games and eat meals; they pray and study together; but Alicia always includes *doing something* with all of the good feelings they have. She teaches them, through experiencing being people for others by participating in the 30-Hour Famine, for instance, that the call to discipleship means leaving our comfort zone of the known and predictable, and putting ourselves out, so to speak, for the sake of another's wellbeing.

In our own congregation and in many other congregations around Kitchener-Waterloo, we volunteer at Out of the Cold. It is not something we would necessarily choose to do, were it not for the holy humus of the gospel. Church people, typically, are people with homes; and at Out of the Cold we encounter people who live on the street or sofa-surf or have no real place to call home. One of our members, who has volunteered for years at the Out of the Cold program at St. John's, Waterloo told me last week that it's a reality check for him; that there is a great disparity, difficult to justify, in how people live in K-W.

As you may know, there are several local organizations who do saving work with those who are poor or marginalized in our community – all of them born in and sustained by communities of faith: the House of Friendship, Mary's Place, Supportive Housing of Waterloo, Ray of Hope, Saint Monica House, the Salvation Army, St. John's Kitchen, the Working Centre, St. Mark's-Calvary Community Outreach Ministry. The list goes on and on, and even includes the relatively modest contribution our parish makes through our donations to the Food Bank of Waterloo Region and to Canadian Lutheran World Relief.

Poverty, of course, is an important and conspicuous concern in the midst of the affluence so many enjoy in our region, and in our province and country; but there is a myriad of other issues. Each of us has skills, gifts, and talents that we can use for the benefit of another. Once in a while, I meet someone who, for one reason or another, did not have the benefit of a family (or a supportive family) and who was effectively adopted as a family member by strangers: more often than not these adoptions, be they actual adoptions or informal arrangements, become life-giving in ways that are not fully appreciated unless you are the adoptee.

Organizations such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and the Scouting movement have received a fair bit of criticism in recent years for things that should never have happened on their watch; but at the heart of these organizations is a mission to provide a community of mentors for children and youth somewhat akin to adoption.

All of these things, whether they are connected directly to faith groups or not, are a holy business because they involve sharing ourselves for the sake of another, the very thing we see with clarity in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; the very thing we intuit in our relationship with God the Creator and God the Spirit.

Often we pray, "all that we have and all that we are is from God". Living with that sense of gratitude leads us to be gracious towards others who may lack something we have in abundance. If and when the question occurs, "how can we respond?" the gospel answer is never difficult to uncover: God in Christ calls us to be people for others. Responding to that call brings glory to God because in such large living we live beyond self.

Such living is a challenge, because the world is transactional, and so often philanthropy is not cost-effective in terms of our efforts: it would be wonderful if everyone who receives a leg-up from someone who goes out of his/her way never returned to old, destructive patterns; it would be wonderful if once we forgave someone for a wrong we received that we were never hurt again by that person. There is, what Saint Paul calls, a foolishness to the life of discipleship that makes no sense in a world that expects quantifiable returns from investment. The life of discipleship is anything but cost-effective. But, of course, we are not called to love merely for the immediate results, but rather to contribute to a larger climate of generosity, graciousness, and justice that brings near the reign of God. In this context, kindness is never wasted. We are called to love one another, not to improve one another for the sake of making the world a better place. The world is what it is, and our only tools for positive change are love, mercy, justice, truth, gratitude, striving, hoping, accompanying, sharing, mentoring, supporting, challenging, contributing, shouldering, and being present with and for one another.

In, with, and under Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel is the message of urgency – urgency because there is an ephemeral quality to life in the Spirit. We are always drawn back, it seems, to comfort and complacency; to living for ourselves at the expense of the wellbeing of others. The gospel Jesus proclaims is the corrective and it is a constant. It is the holy humus we need in order to bear the fruit of discipleship.