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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Luke 13:1-9

All of us are, without a doubt, familiar with the concept of a money pit. Whether it be an old house that's taking way too long to fix up or an old car that seems to need one repair after another, it's inevitably a drain on our pocketbooks, our morale, and our patience. The amount of money you can spend on one thing seems infinite, and all that spent money often doesn't result in measurable progress. The money just goes into something of a black hole.

Hence, the term money pit.

My well-known enthusiasm for old cars has caused me to become acutely aware of what a money pit is. I look for "deals" on old cars, I guess you could say, but what seems to be a good "deal" can quickly morph into a monstrous, bottomless pit into which I merely throw cash. I can recall two cars for which I paid one dollar apiece -- both of which have likely been through a recycling process by now -- a 1976 Oldsmobile Delta 88 and, later, a 1969 Buick Wildcat, and, before I resurrected them, they had sat around dormant for years. If you have any familiarity at all with getting cars like that going again, you'll know that considerable investment above and beyond one dollar is necessary!

And then there's the distinction between getting them going and

getting them going reliably. Countless surprise glitches can surface with little or no advance warning, and your "deal" that you thought was so wonderful isn't so wonderful when it leaves you stuck out on some country road, dead as a doornail.

But then, both the '76 Delta 88 and the '69 Wildcat gave me many thousands of miles of worry-free service after their, shall we say, major issues were taken care of. Until that point, however, I wasn't sure how much money it would take to get them running right.

So, at what point does a person say enough?

This is not an easy decision, because when we get ourselves into these situations, it's hard to simply terminate a project into which we've invested considerable time and money. If you merely walk away from an unfinished home refurbishing or a not-yet-road-worthy one-dollar car, it's extremely unsatisfying because you haven't completed something you set out to do. And if it doesn't get completed, all that money you spent on the project was spent in vain.

But then, is spending even more money really wise? Would all the time and effort beyond what you've already done really be worth it? Well, in the car department, I have given up on a couple of them, because the cost of getting them going again would simply be too prohibitive and I'd be better off focusing my attention on something more worthwhile.

Now, think of what this might mean in light of this morning's Gospel text. We hear the parable of the fig tree, and of a man complaining to his gardener: "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down!" (Luke 13:7b). As far as we're concerned, we all have things that really don't produce anything, get us anywhere, or do us any good, but, like I said earlier, there's always a point where we just have to say enough! Clearly, this person here in Jesus' parable is at a point where his patience has been exhausted.

So, the question is: Is the fig tree just taking up space and shouldn't the gardener be using that space for something more worthwhile...more "fruitful"? After all, it seems stupid to keep pouring time, money, and effort into something that isn't doing any good! But then the gardener offers a rather surprising suggestion. He says, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down" (Luke 13:8-9). Remember how I talked about coming to the point of determining whether to abandon a project or not? Well, the gardener in this case is deciding to give the fig tree another chance.

It sounds like the fig tree requires only a minimum of investment, though. Far from being a money pit, it only needs a little cultivation and fertilizer. But having the ability to discern between the worthwhile and the wasteful is an ability that comes with wisdom and maturity. You have to hand it to the gardener for

his wisdom; he just wasn't going to give in to a knee-jerk demand to cut the fig tree down.

So why didn't the gardener give up on the tree? That, I hope, is the obvious lesson in this parable. Our Master Gardener -- God -- does not give up on us! So when we're not bearing any fruit, he doesn't come around and say, "Get rid of this useless thing taking up space in my orchard!" On the contrary, he offers us the care that we need, giving us the spiritual food and cultivation to help us bear fruit. With God's help, we're never a lost cause or even a money pit. Think about this, for example, when your kid doesn't get a very good job after you've spent tens of thousands of dollars on his education. Sure, some projects aren't worth it, but the people in your lives are considerably more valuable than an old house you can't get fixed up or an old car you can't get to run right.

And that is, perhaps, the way God thinks about us. Even when we're not bearing fruit, when we're up to no good, or when we're immobilized by despair and sadness, God tends to us with the spiritual food of his Word, through which we are given new life...any time we come to his house and any time we open our Bible. Think of the ways God comes to us and of how persistently he calls us, often when we're not willing to listen to him. But this is the season of Lent, after all, and the cultivation of our spiritual soil during Lent involves listening, and so listen to the God who hasn't given up on you. Listen to the God who sent you his Son to

save you from all the things that prevent you from bearing fruit. He is the Master Gardener who will offer you the care and nourishment to help you grow.

And he will not cut you down just because you aren't bearing any fruit. In fact, he'll see to it that you do. Today, he sees to it in the Lenten call to repentance, calling to us so that we might turn to him to receive the spiritual food for fruitfulness and growth.

The next time you throw more cash down a money pit, whether it be your house, your car, or your toy, consider what you'll receive out of it. Fortunately, I have gotten some good use out of cars that I never thought I'd get running decently. But where we sometimes have to give up because of the cost and the stress on us, God, on the other hand, has infinite resources to offer us, and he never gives up -- for there he will be, among his fig trees, helping the ones not bearing any fruit. You see, we are not money pits, we are not useless, and God has a way of bringing the best out in us.

Now we are called to let the Master Gardener do his work.

Amen.