

Immanuel United Church
The fourth Service of Lent
March 27th, 2022

Welcome

Call to Worship:

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

**It is good to be together, God,
together listening for your voice, united by your Spirit.**

In this time of worship,
tell us about your kingdom of kindness so that we can seek it.
Show us your justice.

We want to journey with you, humbly, closely, daily.

Prayers:

**Spirit of God,
when paths of transformation lead us into times of wilderness —
periods of learning and unlearning,
realities winding and uncertain,
may your presence be our steady companion.
If we feel afraid of the unfamiliar or unknown —
a stranger to where you are leading,
remind us we do not go alone.
All who seek your Wisdom are wandering.
When we forget, remind us this is part of Love's work.
Help us to be patient with our journey,
letting Love set the pace.**

Hymn: VU 121 *Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery*

Scripture: Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in

Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '

Anthem: Come to the Water

Reflection: For one more year

My father was born in Haenam, a town known for its location at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, a sea town, a country town, far from the money and political power of Seoul. I remember a few visits in August when I was a child. My parents wanted me and my brother to live with Grandma and Grandpa for a month. I never asked them why they sent us to Haenam, so I don't know what educational or parenting purpose they were thinking of when they planned the visits. My grandparents' hometown, where my father grew up, was rural, so in the 1980's, no road or yards were paved, just fertile dirt and soil, except for the highways surrounding the town. When it rained, I remember the front yard of my grandparents' humble traditional Korean house ended up muddy, boggy and sticky. But there was a fig tree behind the fence, and the fruit would deliciously ripen and split in the August heat — the summer sky clear blue, without even a speck of clouds. I never saw fruit looking like that in the city, and I regret that I did not try the figs right from the branches. The tree didn't need any manure or fertilizer put around it to bear fruit. It was just nature's gift that everyone at the time took for granted... wild, juicy, plenty.

In today's reading, Jesus tells a parable about a fruitless fig tree. I bet the fact that it didn't bear any fruit was a useful image, helping people imagine and understand what that could mean. It's unusual for a fig tree to not have a single fruit on it. The others probably bore an abundance of fruit; people took for granted that laden fig trees were the natural order of things. The fruitless, or "barren", fig tree is a struggling one, alone, unique and failing, which could elicit more compassion than judgement. In Jesus' parable, it receives harsh judgement and it is about to cut down by the owner of the vineyard based on his worldview. You know, he's a vineyard owner, the land owner. The space that the fruitless fig tree takes up means the loss of commodity, the loss of income. Personally, I think my grandparents would still keep the tree in their front yard

even without the promise of fruit production. At least, they would not want to cut it down - they were already busy with their daily work.

Then, the gardener in today's parable shows a more proactive and compassionate attitude towards the fruitless fig tree. To the calculating owner of the vineyard who says, "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I still find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" the gardener responds and insists that they should let it alone for one more year.

"Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." Think about the hard work the gardener is actually volunteering for, in addition to and beyond the task he has been called and hired for: putting the fertilizer on it. It would mean not just one day's effort to make it better. The gardener promises his commitment to both tree and owner, by putting fertilizer on it, making other efforts, not just one day, but giving care throughout the year, to make sure they would see the result — at least one fruit ripening on this tree the next summer. After one year, from that day. So the gardener is asking for "One more year."

I believe that that's the way Christ works with the fertilizer of unconditional love. Unconditional love doesn't mean that there is no condition, no criteria of justice, especially restorative justice, racial justice, gender equity and so on. People at the grassroots, protestors, activists, scholars, politicians, journalists, poets, people of faith, all work together. They study, explore, develop better understandings to bring the new dreams, the new definition of Kin_dom of God, into reality. There are conditions, there are criteria for us, the world, to witness, affirm, to build just peace. I believe unconditional love means that love changes the hard conditions in life; it enables new hopes to bear fruit. Christ's unconditional love blends the fertilizer of hard work, with us, with the people of God, children of God, to set a ripe, delicious, good fruit on the tree of justice.

Let me share an example: Last Sunday, I was not able to share the following reflection on just peace in Palestine and Israel. "Often the criticism levelled at the Middle East is a stereotypical 'They've always fought and they always will.' (I did put it in the worship package) Yet we know that even in the past century, many situations of seemingly endless conflict have yielded to the beginnings of real peace. To dismiss a conflict as hopeless denies the hopes and humanity of all who live with conflict. It also denies the hope at the centre of our faith. How do we, in this moment, in this place, express God's unconditional love for all?"

Ultimately, I find that today's Gospel reading is about hope, patiently persisting, aligned with another theme in today's reading which is "repent". Rather than finding faults in others (for example, as a crowd of people did in today's reading, pointing their fingers at Pilate or the Romans and blaming them for bloodshed and destruction), Jesus flips the script and tells the crowd to repent, to be eager to change their hearts and look at their own sinful behaviours and reorient themselves towards transforming justice. Then, Jesus urges the crowd to learn from the parable he tells. The owner of the vineyard wants to cut his losses and cut down the fig tree that has not produced fruit for three years. The gardener, however, advises patience and greater care. The gardener recommends that if the tree does not become fruitful after another year, then cut it down. There will be a day of reckoning. There are consequences for not being productive, not being able to be transformed and transformative. Jesus cautions repentance, eagerness for transforming justice in heart, mind, and actions. Now is the time for digging around more deeply and nurturing the fruit of unconditional love, Christ's love that transforms the conditions that resist change in the world.

Today, we are invited to ask: "Why do you think the gardener in Jesus' parable gives the fig tree one more year?" What are the gifts which, like fertilizer, invite you to practice unconditional love, the Christ-love that transforms the conditions of the world and of our lives, that grows just peace? The new budding fig tree's fruit tastes of joy and deliciousness.

The United Church has designated March 21st as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This day offers a particular focus on dismantling racism in all its forms, and it has been observed around the world every year since 1966. It is important to focus on anti-racism during a day such as this. However, the struggle against racism, the persisting hope for racial justice in Canada, in the world, is a continuous effort. It is not just for three years, or one year. Putting fertilizer on the fig tree of racial justice is important on any day and every day. Each designated justice-focused day, such as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, is more like an anniversary that comes back each year to remind us of the covenant we make in our hearts and actions to do better. Try harder for transforming justice, setting new goals as a gardener of hope.

My father's birthplace, Haenam, literally means "The Sea in the South." The name reminds me of the Korean hot summer in August, when there was no pollution whatsoever, just blue sky everywhere without a single speck of cloud. The field of the plump red-hot peppers on the hill was a beautiful sight; the ripened figs at the corner of the rock fence were gifts of nature, taken for granted, grown without human care. Sadly, I do not think that fig tree still stands at my grandparents' old place, (the owners changed, of course), but it is a fond memory for me to keep, to remind me that God's

dream can grow and ripen, even if it is planted in the desert of divisions, but only if we care for it, only if we work like the gardener, the gardener of hope, with the fertilizer of God's unconditional love. We must persist in being the makers of the river that flows and soaks the dryness of the desert of divisions. (Show the worship centre the Elders created for this Sunday: blue play-dough water running through the desert of divisions, dissolving the two sides with the water of life rolling towards the dry river beds.)

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus" (Isaiah 35:1)

Hymn: VU 267 *Like a Mighty River*

Offering: MV 196 *We Will Take What You Offer*

Prayers of the People

Hymn: VU 307 *Touch the Earth Lightly*

Commissioning and Benediction:

**And the blessing of God,
who made us in unconditional love,
who made us for companionship,
who made us enhance and strengthen the world,
go with us as we leave this place,
into all the places life calls us to be.
We do not go alone. We go, beloved and blessed,
to be a blessing. Amen.**

Amen