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FMC Reedley
Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9
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The Forgiveness Feast

What do you need to grow?

Today we hear two feasting stories. Isaiah announces a holy feast of milk, wine, and forgiveness to a barren nation and Jesus a parable about fertilizing a barren fig tree. And tucked into the back of both of these passages is the question, are we worthy of this holy forgiveness feast?

The corrosive idea of worthiness runs deep in our culture. Our economy demands money to be worthy of eating and surviving another day. Our job market demands that we have a worthy body and mind to get a job to earn said money. Many churches demand we live a holy life to be worthy of attending church. To make things a bit more real for us here today, I've heard the comment, we're old, our bodies don't work well enough for the kind of physical labor service needed to be a good Mennonite. A comment, many of you proved wrong when your less-abled bodies helped setup the Popal family's home and yard. Or maybe people have told you that First Mennonite doesn't believe in Jesus because you read the bible differently from them. A preposterous statement for a community whose central commitment is to live as Jesus lived. This fills me with great sadness because people are too hard on you and many of you are too hard on yourselves.

But the good news is that you are not alone in this sense of unworthiness. In today's scripture, the owner came to his vineyard and instructs the gardener, "cut down this fig tree because it has not produced fruit for three years" The owner is concerned with worthiness, is this fig tree worth the soil it is taking up? Like calling someone a waste of oxygen. But the gardener argues back, "do not be hasty, perhaps it is not the tree's fault, but the soil, I will fertilize it and give special attention to this tree. If this truly is a barren tree, then cut it down next year."

The farmers in this congregation probably have a better understanding of this text than I. Every year, you must make difficult decisions. Do I rip out my raisin grapes to make room for almonds? How much money can I spend on fertilizing or pH adjusting this patch of unproductive trees? The gardener is making a difficult and costly decision to give this tree another year. The big question in this parable is, is this tree unworthy or is its growth inhibited by poor soil? Jesus uses this economic farming question to help us think about people, when I judge that someone is unworthy, what I am really saying is, I give up on their potential because they are a lost cause.

Jesus knows that the soil of Galilee and Jerusalem is horrible. They are under Roman occupation, dying at the hands of Pontius Pilate. And if people do not turn away from that brutal system,

Pilate will be coming for them too. And I think that we too need to come to terms with the reality that we live in an imperfect society and are planted in poor soil. Where forces of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, decide from our birth who is worthy of survival and acceptance and who should be cut down. Consider a concrete example of today. we care for the Popal family because while we opposed the wartorn soil made by our military in Afghanistan, these people are created by God and have intrinsic worth. And so we to sit down, put our hands into the soil and place fertilizer around the roots.

And isn't that what we all need? Fertilizer on our roots.

Brothers and Sisters, hear these words of Isaiah,
Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.

Come to the table. Come to the feast. I don't care if you are worthy or are bearing fruit. I don't care if you read the bible like me. I don't care if your legs cooperate or if responsibilities limit the time you have to give right now. That's not my job. My job is to fertilize you, give you hope, and help you grow. And I am right there with you, you have given me hope and helped me grow these past two years. You took me in right out of seminary and supported me as I fumbled around trying to be a pastor during a global pandemic. I've led a Sunday School that some forbade me from teaching and asked questions about supposedly settled biblical law. So I am filled with gratitude that you all continue to nourish me.

Brothers and sisters, we have been through a lot together and we have sustained each other with the fertilizer of love, patience, and encouragement. When new people came to our church, we fertilized them with leadership roles and they have borne fruit. When we've needed help moving houses or help with meals, people have nourished each other. These are the practices of a church that is living into the abundant life of the forgiveness feast. Where we invite the refugee and the queer to the ever expanding table of God. So let us continue to fertilize each other, not because any of us is worthy, but because the love of God is for the thirsty, the penniless, and the barren.
Amen