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Lent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Holy Manure!”
Text: Luke 13:1-9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What happens when the careful plan you have laid out for your life goes wrong? We all plan out our lives; establish goals and dream dreams; and then work to make those goals and dreams come true. But what happens when they don't? What happens when things go wrong?

For example, just when things are going well with my investments, and my financial future is looking up, and it looks like I'll be set for the rest of my life . . . the stock market crashes. And all my plans get messed up.

Or, you eat right. You exercise. You watch the calories and the carbs and the fats. Not too much caffeine, not too much alcohol, and on and on. And then the doctor tells you about the disease they just found in you.

We plan our careers. Go to the right school. Study hard and do well. Get a good job. Catch the eye of the boss. Start moving up . . . and then you're downsized! Laid off.

You find a spouse and get married. You have children and plan how you're going to spend the rest of your life with this person that you love . . . and then your spouse dies.

Even spiritually this can happen. We come to church. We hear and learn. We study. We're growing in our faith. Getting things figured out. And then terrorists fly airplanes into buildings! Trains blow up in Spain. And we wonder *what in the world is God doing?* Why didn't He stop it? Why?

We want things to be predictable. We like things in life to be neat and clean. To work the way they're *supposed* to. Fairness. Justice. Equity. Equality. . . . But what happens when that doesn't happen? When life gets all messed up – which always seems to happen?

Well that “messiness” is what drove the conversation between Jesus and those He was teaching in the Holy Gospel today. Life was messy. Things weren’t working out. They ask Jesus about one of the “messy” things that had happened lately. Hey Jesus, what about those Galileans? Did you hear about that? They were doing the right thing! They had come up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and while they were offering their sacrifices at the Temple, they were slaughtered and their blood was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. That’s not right! How can something like that happen, Jesus? What about that?

Jesus answers them with another “messy” example. The time the Tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 people. What about that? . . . And we could play this game for a while, coming up with hundreds of examples.

But what of it, Jesus asks? Is this all because of sin? Did the Tower fall on those people because they were sinners? Were those who were slaughtered worse sinners than everyone else? Do airplanes fly into buildings and trains blow up because those people are sinners? Do I get fired, or get my disease, or have my spouse die because I am a sinner?

How would you answer that question?

Well the answer is both yes and no. These things certainly happen because of sin in the world. If there was no sin, there would be none of that. . . . But at the same time, **no**, these are not punishments for your sin. God does not play tit for tat. Worse sinners do not get punished worse and lesser sinners punished less. No, the punishment for all of our sins – those that we consider really bad, or not so bad, or somewhere in between – has already been given, to Jesus on the cross. He paid for them all. Paid in full.

But then our problem remains – how do we understand life? And how messy it can be?

Jesus gives us the answer in the parable He tells – the parable of the fig tree. A man came to his vineyard looking for fruit on his fig tree. Finding none, he orders the tree chopped down. But the vinedresser, the caretaker, intercedes for the tree. No, he says. Leave it alone one more year. I will dig around it and manure it. Then if there is still no fruit, you can cut it down.

We are the fig trees, whom God has placed in this world. And as the owner, the creator, of us and this world, He has the expectation that we will produce fruit for Him – fruits of faith. But we do not. Why? Because we are sinful trees; barren trees; not doing what we ought to do, and doing those things we ought not do. Not producing the fruit we ought to

produce. And we deserve to be cut down and thrown into the fire of hell. . . . But then Jesus intercedes for us. He intercedes with His Father for us, and says, “No, don’t cut them down, *forgive* them.” For that’s the word that literally used in that parable by Jesus, translated as “*let it alone*.” It is really forgive it. Forgive the tree. Father, forgive them. Let me care for them and manure them.

You see, we need the manure. If you and I are going to produce the fruits of faith, we cannot do it on our own. We need Jesus’ manure.

Now that offends some people. Especially us who want to live our lives so carefully planned and organized. We who like things predictable. We who like things in life to be neat and clean. We don’t want *manure* in our lives – much better would be fertilizer. Yes! You know, the careful, scientific blend. With just the right amount of everything. Carefully and neatly applied. The best the world can come up with, with guaranteed results – yes, that would be good for us!

But is it? Or does the best that the world can come up, and all the things of this world, actually prevent us from producing the fruits of faith?

No, Jesus gives us manure, and uses what the world considers manure to fertilize us. And specifically, that means that He gives us the cross. And so the stock market crashes. We’re receiving manure. We get diseases. We’re receiving manure. We get downsized. We’re receiving manure. Airplanes fly into buildings, trains blow up. We’re receiving manure. . . . We want everything neat and clean. The scientific fertilizer. But Jesus knows what we need. And so He gives it to us. The cross in our lives. And like manure, we think **it stinks!** We want the good stuff – not the manure! But maybe the good stuff isn’t so good. And maybe – just maybe – it’s the manure that will actually cause us to grow. That will actually drive us to our Saviour. That will make us repent.

But it is not only those crosses that our Lord manures us with, but then also with His cross. His cross which is foolishness, *manure*, to the world – and sometimes to our worldly thinking – but is food for us Christians. For Jesus was thrown out with the garbage. Thrown outside of the camp, outside of Jerusalem. Crucified with criminals. Treated like manure. But He does so for us. That He might feed us with Himself. With His cross. As messy as it is. As inconvenient as it is. His cross produces fruit.

And so the crosses in our lives drive us to His cross, and by His death and resurrection, we are fed. And so He feeds us. Joined to His death and resurrection in Holy Baptism, we are manured, given faith and forgiven. And we grow. Eating and drinking His body, and blood, His death and resurrection, in Holy Communion, we are manured,

strengthened in faith, and forgiven. And we grow. And dying and rising with Christ in confession and absolution, we are manured. And we grow. **And thus fed, we produce the fruits of faith.** *Not* because we're good, because we're not. And *not* because our repentance is so sincere, because its not. And *not* because we give up so much, because we don't. But because of the care of the vinedresser, our Saviour. Because He cares enough to manure us. Because He cared enough to lay down His life and become Himself the food that we need to live and not die.

And so sometimes Christ has to upset our neat and tidy lives. He has to disturb us. He has to heap on some manure! And its messy. It may not be predictable. It may not be exactly what we want. And it might stink! . . . And you know, we don't deserve it! Any of it! We don't deserve His care and attention. We don't deserve the manure! We don't deserve His cross, or the crosses He places in our lives. . . . But the vinedresser won't have it any other way. ***“Let them alone.” “Father, forgive them.”*** Let me manure them. And this is good manure. All of it. For this manure drives us to Him and keeps us in Him. In His body and blood. In His kingdom of grace. And as long as we are in Him, we bear fruit. As long as we are in Him, we will never be cut down.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.