Earlier this week, one of my friends posted a picture of her Christmas Cactus plant on her *Facebook* page. She has had this for the past 3-4 years, but year after year to much of her disappointment, that cactus plant would not bloom with any flowers whatsoever.

 Then all of a sudden a few days ago, my friend noticed something unusual. There were these little buds coming out of the tips of her Christmas cactus, as you see here in this photo. Maybe this was the result of the relatively mild winter that we’ve been having or perhaps this is a sign of the season that spring is officially upon us. My friend was glad that she didn’t give up on this plant after she had waited patiently for so many years…year after year after year. But it was all worth the wait.

In the Gospel lesson that we read earlier, Jesus was teaching among the crowd, he made reference to two recent tragic events that occurred that were still fresh on almost everyone’s mind. The first was an act of repression by the Roman government upon a people’s uprising or protest where innocent bloods were shed. The second was a natural disaster that 18 people were killed when the Tower of Siloam collapsed, much like the natural or human-caused disasters that we’ve being seeing on the news these days such the cyclone in Mozambique that has killed thousands or the flooding that’s happening right now in the Midwest. So what do these have to do with the gospel message, you may ask? Well, undoubtedly this question crossed everyone’s mind. Why do bad things happen to some but not to the others? Why some survived while some perished? Why are there so much griefs, tragedy, and disappointments in life? Where’s the good news in the midst of all of this? In both cases, these natural or unnatural tragedies were recounted not to scare the people but as warnings for the people to repent from their sins, so that they will not perish. Jesus reiterated this warning twice in verse 3 and verse 5. He claimed that **“*unless YOU repent, YOU will ALL perish just as they did.”[[1]](#footnote-1)***

Repentance and redemption were two vital themes throughout the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, which by the way were written by the same author. Repentance may lead to redemption; and redemption is meaningless without one’s true repentance from one’s heart. They often go hand-in-hand. Incidentally the word “repentance” in Greek “*metanoia*” literally means “to change one’s mind”, to put on a reverse in one’s course or direction. It implies that something is not right and is in need of a drastic transformation or else it becomes too late and past the point of no return.

Jesus illustrated his point by telling the people a parable – the parable of the fig tree that did not bear any fruits. You notice in this parable, Jesus didn’t say that we should cut the tree down if the tree had failed to bear any fruits immediately. He wasn’t ready to give up on that barren tree just yet. Perhaps all it needs is a little more time, with a little more love and attention spent on it. The gardener sees the potentials in the tree that did not bear any fruits.

This parable reminds me of Charlie Brown who was sent by his friends to search for the perfect Christmas tree. Charlie Brown came back with this sad-looking branch….it was not even a tree. ALL of his friends were laughing at him for picking such a lousy poor looking tree. But Charlie Brown saw something in that branch that others didn’t. He believed in what it could be, and not just what it was in the past or what it is now. The same way as the gardener in our parable today saw the full potential of that fruitless fig tree and was willing to give it additional chances to prove itself.

In other word, Jesus was saying that sometimes we ought to be patient and not expecting immediate results. Just as God offered us a 2nd chance, we also should extend God’s grace to others for their 2nd chance of redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It is not up to our own individual accomplishment but instead through God’s spiritual pruning and nurturing life may be sustained and vitality may be restored…on a tree, in a person, or even the church. Nevertheless, we keep our hopes up and continue to let the Holy Spirit work among us, God has not given up on God’s people just yet and we shouldn’t either. We must continue to strive in our effort in our due diligence according to God’s plan and purpose.

Just as the gardener was not ready to give up on this fig tree even though it was not bearing any fruits or bloom any flowers. Let’s dig up all the bad soil and put in some new soil and gather up some manure and put on top of it! **Yes, even manure can become an agent of change by turning something that most people don’t like to see (and probably not want to smell either), something appears to be useless and discarded into something that’s life-giving, purposeful, and beneficial for the next cycle of life.** We must water our plant, nurture it, and give it some adequate sunlight, and see if it bears any fruits again. At least we can say that we have tried something but failed, rather than failing to try at all. If, however, the plant still doesn’t bear any fruits, then let us NOT waste any more time and resources. We out to re-strategize about our mission. Cut it down and plant something new. Perhaps pruning off the dead branches that are dragging the rest of the body down and turn it into something that is renewing and life giving after all.

 A few years ago, I was introduced to a man who was recently released from the State prison after spending the last 20 years there. We’ll call him “Mike”. After spending those 20 years in prison, Mike vows to become a new man when he came out and reconnected with his family, his friends, and his community. He wanted to put his past behind and looked forward to his future. While he was in prison, he was reached out by the prison ministry of Gethsemane Presbyterian Church and he accepted Christ while he was in prison. Mike believed he had learned his lesson for the wrongs that he had committed against humanity and against God. He was willing to start a clean slate once again. Mike was determined to turn his life around and be a productive member of society going forward. He became involved with his church and eventually became an elder there as well. He has even taken seminary courses and is currently enrolled as a candidate under care of the NYC Presbytery to be ordained someday. God sees something in Mike that perhaps others didn’t and is willing to give Mike a second chance in life. All Mike needs is just a little love.

 As we see in our parable today, the tree that is being pruned represents our Christian lives. The gardener is Jesus and the owner is God. God is willing to give this non-fruit bearing tree a second chance, to see if it would redeem itself by turning itself around and begin to bear fruits once again. But before we do that, the plant needs to come to its sense of awakening and be willing to put in the effort to turns itself around before it’s too late. If some part of the plant is sick, we ought to investigate and find out what the cause of the problem is. Let us prune out the parts that are preventing the grown of the rest, in order to make way for a new branch to grow.

 Within God’s sovereignty, **there is grace and redemption to be found in the midst of hardship and challenges.** Although there may seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel…but still, we need to find our way through the deep-dark tunnel, with the guiding of the light of Christ.

 By God’s grace, we are giving numerous new opportunities to rekindle our relationship with God. We’re invited to bear fruits worthy of our repentance and to grow for our future. New life and growth is happening at the hands of God’s handiwork even as we speak. As God continues to transform our lives both inwardly and outwardly day-by-day, may we examine our lives more closely by identifying those signs of transformation and renewal that are happening all around us.

 The season of Lent invites us to identify areas of our lives or things that are hindering us from our intimate relationship with our God. When was the last time we have a heart-to-heart talk with God? Often times **these toxic and corrupted elements may consume our time, energy and resources away from our mission priorities, as we divest our attention and passion away from God.**

 During this season of Lent, let us pause to examine our own spiritual faith and to “get it right” with God and with others. The ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us of our humbleness and humility that Christ has demonstrated for us. God has invited us to be honest not only with ourselves, but more importantly with God, even if that means lifting all of our baggage, pains and suffering before Him. It just needs a little LOVE!

**This is all part of God’s process of “pruning” and “redeeming” of our spiritual lives...a process that began in the Garden of Eden and will eventually lead us in the Garden of Gethsemane as we come before God in prayer and confession.**

 Through our baptism, we are all engrafted into the body of Christ - the true Vine. For ***“Christ is the true vine and we are His branches. Those who abide in Him, and He in us bear much fruit, because apart from Him we can do nothing.”*[[2]](#footnote-2)**

As we read earlier through the prophet Isaiah, he proclaimed, **“*Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that He may have mercy on them, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways.[[3]](#footnote-3)***

Friends, God desires us to depend upon Him and to remain in the True Vine – our LORD Jesus Christ. God’s Word is the “good soil”, the good manure, and the source of the living water in which our seeds may be sown, new branches may spur and fruits be produced for the Kingdom of God.

 Thanks be to God for his lavished grace and unconditional love, in light of God’s perfect plan for us. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Luke 13:3 and 5* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *John 15:5* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Isaiah 55:6-8* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)