

My first dorm room at the seminary was on the first floor, with a window overlooking one of the many gardens planted around campus grounds. The desk where I often sat at my computer was beneath this window and sometimes I'd catch a bit of a stench in my nostrils. I'd look around my empty room, searching for the source of the smell and wondering if maybe I'd forgotten to shower that morning.

Fortunately for my own olfactory self-esteem, I realized that what I was smelling was a fresh batch of manure spread in the garden beneath my window.

Anyone who's ever worked a farm or a garden will tell you that the smell of manure is a good thing. Manure spread properly feeds nutrients into the soil, nutrients plants need to grow and flourish.

And manure plays a key role in today's parable of the fig tree, in which a gardener spreads manure around a barren fig tree in the hopes that it will finally bear fruit.

We must not see in this parable a crude distinction between the master and the gardener. We are tempted to think of God as the harsh master, so quick to judge and destroy, constrained only by Jesus the tender gardener. Instead, God—the great I AM—is too large for such easy categories. God is present in this story—as the master, who has every right to wish for a bountiful creation, but also as the gardener tending to creation. God is also the manure fertilizing the fig tree's roots.

(God is manure—I'll bet that's not something you expected to hear in a sermon this morning!)

Manure in this sense is a pure distillation of God's life-giving essence, an essence that planted and tended the first garden in creation. God is the foundation of all that is and all that is in creation—and sometimes that creation isn't pretty.

God's appearance to Moses at the burning bush is such a seminal moment that it's easy to forget the circumstances of that appearance, namely the brutal enslavement and indeed borderline genocide of the Hebrews in Egypt. Likewise, our Gospel today begins with people bringing Jesus news of a brutal act of imperial repression—Pontius Pilate's soldiers have murdered people in the act of worship, apparently at the very altar where they were sacrificing so that their blood mingles with blood from the animal they were sacrificing.

As always, this moment in Luke foreshadows Jesus's impending crucifixion, when Pilate's soldiers will make a sacrifice out of his own blood. But there's more going on here. No one ever comes to Jesus just to give him the news of the day. These people are looking for something.

A burst of revolutionary outrage against the Roman occupation, perhaps. Or maybe just an explanation for an act of senseless violence. Why these people? What did they do to deserve such a fate?

Echoed in this exchange, I hear a similar question from the Gospel of John, perhaps one of the most important questions ever put to Jesus: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Explain it to me, Jesus. Tell me why this man was born blind, why these people were murdered. What did they do to deserve such a fate? And more importantly, what can I do to keep it from happening to me?

Jesus gives us no easy answers. In fact, his answer at first seems rather callous. "Oh, you think that's bad? Well let me tell you about those guys who got crushed flat by a tower. Now there's some senseless violence for you!"

There's a harsh undertone to all of this, an unsettling reminder of that terrible truth we begin to uncover as children and then discover all the more clearly in our adult lives: life isn't fair. (A fact that we learn and then conveniently forget as long as the unfairness goes, often unseen, in our failure).

Early Church theologians like Saint Augustine believed that the childish preoccupation with fair and unfair missed the point entirely, since it ignores our own all-encompassing culpability and sinfulness. In this time of Lent we are called not to weigh the world's injustices and complain about their impact on us but to confess our own roles in the injustices of the world.

There is more to this world than a tabulation of sin and fairness. God undergirds all, and ultimately we use our time in this life to orient our hearts and souls towards the eternal I AM as revealed to Moses.

When Moses asks the name of the god in the bush, a name he can bring back to the Hebrews to explain just who has given him this mission, God gives him this strange answer: I AM WHO I AM. There's a bit of a non-answer here, a sense of displeasure that anyone would dare ask God such an impertinent question. God soon clarifies that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but the riddle persists.

I AM WHO I AM.

The God who simply is. The God who is the foundation of all existence, a God whose very name speaks to an eternity beyond human comprehension.

The commands of God are not always simple and pleasant—Love and be Loved! There is a cost to Christian living. Paul's message to the Corinthians talks about idolatry not because the Corinthians are so much better than the ancient Israelites, but because those Corinthian Christians were already slipping back into idolatry. If the gods of Greece and Rome weren't real, went their reasoning, then the idols in their temples mean nothing and it's no big deal if we say a few meaningless prayers when the Corinthian community holds pagan religious festivals.

In other words, we can be Christian without sacrificing anything we enjoyed about our old lives.

Like the people asking Jesus for an easy judgement on the Romans and dead Galileans, we look at the Israelites and the Corinthians and marvel at their sinfulness while remaining blind to our

own. If we truly examine our own lives, how often would we find ourselves guilty of trying to reconcile the commands of God to the pleasures of this world?

Last week we opened our service with the Ten Commandments. Worship no God but God. Have no idols. Keep God's name holy. Keep the Sabbath holy. Honor thy father and mother. Do not murder, do not commit adultery. Do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not covet.

Some strike us as easier to keep than others. I haven't murdered anyone this week, so I'm more or less in the clear, I say before turning around and coveting what isn't mine while passing judgement on those who seem more sinful than me

It's so easy to resist other people's temptations.

Yet within the law of God lies not simple proscriptions—do this, don't do that—but a call for a virtuous and fruitful life. There is a reason the parable of the fig tree—a parable about bearing good fruit—follows the call to repentance. The fig tree in this story isn't doing anything. It isn't murdering or stealing or committing adultery. Yet it will not bear fruit.

I recently read an essay that spoke out against a “morality of the dead.” So much of our modern lives seem tied up in merely holding to the status quo, being unobtrusive, not hurting anyone, and getting by as quietly and comfortably as we can. Well, if this is the standard for living, went the argument, then the dead have everyone beat by virtue of not bothering anyone and generally not having any needs at all.

But we worship not a god of the dead but a God of the living. Moses would have been content to live life as a humble shepherd, serving his father in law, not really troubling anyone at all. God's call to him in the wilderness was a call to life.

Moses's life certainly wasn't easy. It most certainly doesn't seem fair, at least by our thinking. He was disbelieved and disliked by his people at every turn—because he told hard truths, because he married a foreigner, because he wouldn't leave well enough alone. His own people threatened to stone him on more than one occasion. He never entered the promised land and his reward for a lifetime of service was an unmarked grave in the desert.

The righteous life comes at a cost. But can anyone say that Moses's life did not bear fruit?

To live is to be a present, active force in creation, a hungry soul in search of a living God. The great I AM, the great riddle of life, is to seek life amidst a culture of death. True repentance is not merely groveling in our unworthiness but it is in seizing the true life offered to God, who spreads the manure of life around our roots and bids us to grow and bear fruit.

Manure stinks. It's messy. It's not exactly pretty to look at. It takes humility to get down in the dirt and work the manure. But in that stink and mess lies the nurturing love of God. So live! Grow! Seek after God and share your fruit with a hungry world.