

## Uselessly Useful

Luke 13:1-9

This object [a vase] would have to be one of the most useless things ever! It was given to Tresma and me as a wedding present. What would you say it is? A vase. Yes, that's what I thought too. Pretty obvious, really. But, look . . . it's got holes in it! Okay, I thought, we can work with that, the holes are pretty high up . . . then I looked on the bottom . . . on the bottom there's a little sign . . . that says . . . "No water"! No water?! This is a vase! The most useless, good-for-nothing vase in the world . . . I don't even know why we keep it in the shelf . . . it just takes up space.

That's not too unreasonable is it? You've got a vase . . . you expect it to be able to put water in it . . . you'd expect it to hold flowers! You following my logic? And, if I can't put flowers in it I may as well throw it out and get one I can put flowers in it! Let's face it . . . that's just the way of the world . . . we want things that are functional . . . technology that makes life easier . . . got a problem? They'll be an app to solve it . . . and if something's broke, you don't fix it . . . you throw it out and get one that works . . . get one that works for you . . . it just makes sense! Relationship not working? Throw it away and find another that works for you . . . who wants to waste time in a useless relationship? Isn't that the way of the world?

And, if that's the way of the world . . . our world . . . yours and mine! . . . perhaps it's also the way of God . . . perhaps it's how God operates? That seems to be what those pop-theologians thought . . . the ones in Luke's story . . . they come to Jesus with some lurid tabloid headline about some Galileans who Pilate bumped off . . . they must have been particularly disappointing to God for that to happen . . . they must have been particularly useless and obnoxious . . . so God had enough and got rid of them. Well, I can't imagine why he would need people like that . . . surely they wouldn't be any use to him. That's only logical isn't it? That's the way of the world!

But, hang on . . . Jesus is having none of that logic. No, no, no . . . that's not how it works . . . those blokes were no more dysfunctional than anyone else . . . it wasn't that they were somehow worse sinners than everyone that they suffered that fate. Well, thank goodness for that! But . . . wait . . . they weren't worse sinners . . . but, they were still sinners . . . and they died . . . just as all sinners will die . . . just as you and I will die . . . as they did . . . in fact, what Jesus is saying is that we're all in the same boat . . . every single human being . . . in God's eyes we're all as bad as each other.

But, doesn't Jesus says "unless you repent"? Well, yes, he does! And, how are you going with that? Repentance doesn't just mean saying sorry, it means turning your life around . . . it means changing how you live . . . it means changing who you are . . . it means being holy and righteous and perfect. Isn't that our intention when we confess our sins every Sunday? We intend to live better, more connected with God etc etc. How's that going? Perfection in thoughts, words and deeds? Will you trust in your repentance to get you through? The trouble is we can't rid ourselves of our sinfulness . . . and the imperfection of sin and the perfection of the almighty God do not go together! And, by that logic, God must look at the human beings in the world and think, "They are the most useless, good-for-nothing things I ever made".

But, there's more to life than logic . . . there's also parable. All this is just a lead up to the parable . . . Jesus tells a parable . . . and, when Jesus tells a parable you know you are going to find out something important about the kingdom of God . . . something important about God.

But, before we go to that parable, let's return to the parable of the vase . . . that useless, good-for-nothing vase. Tresma tells me this vase is a piece of art . . . dysfunctional art, she calls it . . . this vase

was designed to be useless . . . it was never intended to be useful in the way I was thinking of useful . . . it was simply created to give pleasure . . . to give pleasure first and foremost to the artist . . . to its creator . . . but, then, also to others who get to see it. It does not need to have any other use to justify its existence. And, this useless, good-for-nothing vase is special to Tresma and me because it was given to us as a gift.

Jesus told a parable about a fig-tree . . . a useless, good-for-nothing fig tree . . . a fig tree that wasn't doing what fig trees are s'posed to do . . . a fig tree that was simply taking up valuable space. Logic says, "Cut it down". That's the way of the world . . . and, it makes sense . . . this fig tree was useless . . . it definitely wasn't repenting enough . . . it hadn't changed . . . and surely it had been given long enough. The logical thing would be to cut down.

But, there's more to life than logic . . . there's also the gardener. The gardener who knows this tree . . . the gardener who, dare I say, planted this tree . . . the gardener who can't cut the tree down . . . who won't cut the tree down . . . no matter how useless it is . . . the gardener who takes pleasure in the tree simply because it is a fig tree . . . surely a fig tree without figs is a waste of space . . . but, this gardener will advocate for the tree anyway . . . this gardener is prepared to get his hands dirty for this tree . . . this gardener will sweat and toil for this tree . . . this gardener will suffer for this tree . . . this gardener will hang on a cross and cry out "Father, leave them alone . . . they don't know what they are doing". This gardener will die . . . and rise again . . . for all useless, good-for-nothing fig trees. Fig trees that really can offer him nothing . . . that can give no guarantee of bearing fruit . . . but fig trees whom he loves and treasures and takes great delight in anyway.

So, does it matter if the fig tree bears fruit, or not? Does it matter if *we* never bear the fruit of repentance? Well, it won't change who the gardener is and *how* the gardener is . . . he loves us already . . . he doesn't *need* our repentance . . . he doesn't need our goodness . . . or, our good deeds . . . but, I'll tell you who does need them . . . the 122 million refugees in the world . . . and if that's too overwhelming how about the lonely people in nursing homes who never get a visit . . . or your immediate neighbour who's opened up to you about their fears . . . or the hundreds of thousands of people in Adelaide who have only ever heard the logic, but never the gospel . . . *they* need our fruit. That's why the gardener keeps digging . . . and cultivating . . . and pruning . . . so, like this vase, we might be uselessly useful . . . so we might be a gift to our neighbour . . . so that others might see who we are and ask: "Who's the artist?"

Amen.

Pastor John Strelan  
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley  
Lent 3, 2025