



## Sermon

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 23, 2025

Luke 13:1-9

The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey

Christ Church Detroit

In her book *This Here Flesh*, the author Cole Arthur Riley writes, “We can delight that God made the garden with all those trees of fruit to feast on, but the earth is ailing and eroding from overconsumption and neglect. I shouldn’t need to recite a litany of wounds and injustices and decay in order to justify my sadness. In lament, our task is never to convince someone of the brokenness of the world; it is to convince them of the world’s worth in the first place. True lament is not born from that trite sentiment that the world is bad but rather from a deep conviction that it is worthy of goodness.”<sup>1</sup> In Riley’s words, then, lament springs from a deep conviction of worth. Lament names what matters and who matters, and cries out when their worth and their mattering are not being seen or tended.

She points out that there are and can be many reasons why a person or community might not be so fully tended that it can bear fruit, be productive, put on a happy face, and live up to expectations. We are like trees, deeply and mysteriously interconnected: a single tree not bearing fruit does not mean that that tree is unworthy or does not matter and should be cut down and rooted out, but rather, that its condition should be lamented and therefore become a catalyst to what could be.

Lament cries that something is not right, but lament does not stay there. It cries and calls out for what *should* be, for what *is* truly, and thus lament is a voice and action of hope. In contrast, such feelings and conditions as shame, despair, apathy (that disconnection and release of feeling), when they’re in the soil, they can impede growth. Shame, despair, and apathy are not voices or actions of hope or possibility, but they stay in what is *not*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (New York: Random House, 2022), p. 98.

The owner of the vineyard has this fig tree that has not been producing fruit for three years. The owner is hungry, goes to the tree, looks for fruit, finds none, and in his frustration, he cries, “This tree still has no fruit on it! What purpose or worth could it possibly have? Cut it down, take it out. It is wasting the soil. This tree is a waste of space, time, and resources. It has no worth or purpose; it does not matter. Cut it out.”

The gardener is so bold as to speak up to this frustrated owner to say, “Wait a minute - let me tend it. Let me uncover what might be getting in the way of its growth and flourishing. Let me put some manure on it, let me give it what it needs, and then let’s see what happens.”

In our Lenten devotional study, we’re looking at a book called *Turning Over Tables*, which examines how Jesus engages with power among people in his day, and how that might enlighten and guide us also to engage power and how it works among people—or doesn’t work, as the case may be.<sup>2</sup> This week’s reflections are on lament: what it is and what it isn’t. It contains a quote that says, “We don’t lament just to be sad, but instead to help us understand that things are not the way they should be, by uncovering truths about life as we know it.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the gardener laments the tree’s lack of production of fruit: this tree is not flourishing in the ways that it could, and not demonstrating its potential in the ways that it is meant to and in the ways that it certainly can. Unlike the owner, who is laden with apathy, shame, and despair that nothing will or could ever change, the gardener is so bold as to lament, to cry and mourn the tree’s condition, but not let that be the end of the story. The gardener is so bold as to use their skills and resources to help it flourish, to “uncover truths” about what is getting in the way, to literally dig around it and get into it and help. For as Cole Arthur Riley had pointed out, a singular tree does not exist unto or by itself, but rather by the condition of its soil—and when the soil is laden with shame, despair, and apathy, how can we expect this flourishing?

There are a couple of authors who study worth and mattering. They write books and scholarship about human mattering, our human “connection to personal and communal well-being” through the sense of, well, mattering.<sup>4</sup> Does the tree matter? Do we matter? These authors say that “feeling like we matter is one of the most defining features of our humanity. When that feeling [of mattering] is present, we thrive. When [the feeling of mattering] is absent, we feel ignored and helpless.”<sup>5</sup> One scholar in this work “defines

---

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Escobar, *Turning Over Tables: A Lenten Call for Disrupting Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Bizzy Feekes, quoted in Escobar, *ibid.*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Luke A. Powery, “Mattering”, sermon on Luke 13:1-9 preached in Duke University Chapel, March 20, 2022: <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/03.20.22%20-%20Luke%20A.%20Powery%20Sermon%20-%20Mattering.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Powery, *ibid.* Isaac Prilleltensky and Ora Prilleltensky, “The Mattering Effect” blog article, *Fifteen Eighty Four: Academic perspectives from Cambridge University Press*, April 21, 2021, <https://cambridgeblog.org/2021/04/the-mattering-effect/>

matter as the perception that ‘we are a significant part of the world around us’ and that mattering is comprised of awareness, importance, and reliance:<sup>6</sup>

- awareness, that someone sees us, we are not invisible, we exist, and we are real;
- importance, that we are the object of someone’s caring or concern and are known;
- reliance, in that we have something to offer; when there is need, we can be relied upon to offer and contribute what we have.

Mattering is about feeling value of our own and adding and naming the value that we see in others<sup>7</sup>—naming the truth that we hear in our scriptures today, in one form after another, that no one matters more than another; no one is or should be valued more or less than another.<sup>8</sup>

We all are born and created with innate worth and value, and our task, then, is to name and share that with one another, and to lament when it does not happen. Our task is to, like the gardener, be so bold as to use the tools, resources, knowledge, and heart that we have to tend what may be getting in the way of someone being seen and known and knowing their inherent worth.

These scholars point out that when people do not feel a sense of mattering, and even when entire communities are disaffected from a sense of being valued or seen, the tendency is to respond in one of two ways, which we see:

- One toward extreme commitment to being overvalued and to overvaluing one person or community over another and acting accordingly;
- Another response is to defend that inherent worth and value and mattering at all costs.<sup>9</sup>

We see these responses demonstrated in the owner and the gardener. In this case, the owner—weighed down and disaffected by apathy, despair, and shame that change is not possible, listens to the gardener, who laments the condition, names that more is inherently possible, and commits himself to acting toward that change.

Lament, then, catalyzes change; it is not born from a view that “the world is bad” and hopeless, that anyone is worthless or should be cut out, excluded, or punished, or worse, but rather from a “deep conviction” that all of creation—the fig tree and each of one us—is worthy, “worthy of goodness”,<sup>10</sup> not wasting soil, space, time, attention, or resources, but worthy because we are created, exist, and matter. Lament—naming what is wrong and moving toward change—can help us grow through the soil into change. It does not mean that we have

---

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Elliott, quoted in Isaac Prilleltensky and Ora Prilleltensky, *How People Matter: Why It Affects Health, Happiness, Love, Work, and Society* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:12: “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone.” Luke 13:1-5, “Do you think they were worse sinners because they suffered in this way?...Do you think they were more guilty than all the others?”

<sup>9</sup> See Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, *How People Matter*, pp. 6-7, for example.

<sup>10</sup> Riley, *ibid.*

to have reasons for everything that is amiss. It does mean that we commit to seeing the way forward.

Riley concludes her piece on the subject that, “I think when God bears witness to our lament, we discover that we are not calling out to a teacher” (and here I’m about to embellish a little) who will write out on a chalkboard why things are wrong and why things have turned out the way that they have and that there is a logic to it, She does not look to God to be a teacher, professor of logic, but when God bears witness to our lament, to our naming of what is wrong and our yearning for what is right and could be, then we invite “God as our nurturer, [as] a mother who hears her child crying in the night.”<sup>11</sup> I would add that we call out to and listen to God our gardener, who knows our past, our present, and future so much more than we can see. God our patient, magnanimous gardener commits with all of God’s being to help us to grow, heal, and root out what is getting in the way of flourishing, for God our gardener sees and is committed to the worth and value of all of God’s children. There is no “us and them” to God our gardener: all of us bear God’s own innate worth. This matters with all of our being.

---

<sup>11</sup> Riley, *ibid.*, 99