

Lection: Mark 13:24-37

Today, I want to talk about Christmas trees and while some very religious people will tell you that Christmas trees are a Germanic pagan intrusion into the purity of the season, I love them. To begin with, I searched all over the Bible for a proper biblical text for a person who wants to talk about Christmas trees. Short of transforming the Cedars of Lebanon into North Carolina Frazier firs, there just isn't one. And I freely confess that it is probably a poor preacher who gets an idea and then hunts around for a text to justify what she or he wants to say, but I still want to talk about Christmas trees.

And my text is a single verse in our reading from Mark's gospel: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: (figs are as close as I could get)--- as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.” (Mk. 13:28) Well, as soon as Christmas trees begin appearing on lots, as soon as they show up on the top of cars and sticking out of trunks, and huddling in every possible commercial space, as soon as lighted bows appear in the neighbor's window, as soon as they show up in local churches, the days of Christmas are drawing near. And of course, what Mark is trying to tell us about is the second coming of Jesus—not just the sentimental observance of the arrival of a harmless baby—but the advent once

again of the Christ who will come to judge the quick and the dead. But more on that later, right now I want to talk about Christmas trees.

Every year at this time, I begin a careful search for our family Christmas tree. It involves driving around all over the place and checking out what's available. It has often involved a dozen stops and long walks through Christmas tree lots. Some years it has taken me far out into the country when I've lived in a place where Christmas trees grow. Now I know that I could do it with a lot less energy and in a lot less time, I could get an artificial Christmas tree, but that's not the point. In Christmas trees and in life, the search is often more important than the discovery. Jesus told us to seek and we would find. Lesson one: life is often what happens to us when we savor the things around us when we're on the way to somewhere else.

Each year on my search for a Christmas tree, I look for something just a bit different. When my sons were at home, this part of my search always drove them wild. They were total traditionalists, the world of pine began and ended with the traditional Scotch pine, just like Grandma always had—but I wanted to consider Frazier Firs from North Carolina or Balsam Fir or a Blue Spruce or even some exotic new variety from the Pacific Northwest. Lesson two: new things and old are not opposites and neither one is better. What is better is the new and the old working together for a new future. That's what a living faith is all about.

Each year my search for a Christmas tree involves looking for perfection in pine. One year when I was little, we went out to the family farm to cut our own Christmas tree. I saw the tree I wanted from a distance and it was perfect in every respect. But then we got it home—and we had twelve foot ceilings in our old house—but that perfect in every respect Christmas tree measured in at sixteen feet. I can't even begin to tell you how mangy that thing looked with the best four feet cut off the bottom. But then our family began to decorate that tree and generations of glass ornaments and those old NOMA lights transformed that tree into absolute perfection. Lesson three: when you add love to something as ugly as sin, the ugliness disappears and only the love remains and the situations in our lives which give us pain are often the best place to discover the presence of God. Never, never, never, give up when it hurts.

Another year, I took my sons with me looking for the perfect tree. And we all believed that we had found it. When we got it home, I was left alone in the garage to get the tree into the base before taking it into the house. I discovered that the trunk of that perfect tree was so large that it would not fit into the base and after an hour or so of primitive wood carving, the tree was so top heavy that it would not stand for more than ten minutes. That was the year that the tree ended up wired to wall and ceiling. Lesson four, while searching for holiday perfection, don't loose sight of the trunk—or rather the foundation.

No amount of celebrating can prop up a heart which has not touched the truth that God's love in Jesus Christ is inviting us to love one another without condition and forgive as we have been forgiven.

Early in my adult life, I decided that I would always have a Christian Christmas tree. At age twenty-five, I knew exactly what that would look like. It would have crystal clear lights, symbolizing the light of God and the nativity star. It would have only ornaments which were Christian symbols and those ornaments would all be white or gold in color—to symbolize the purity of Christ's birth and his royal nature. Each ornament was to be carefully selected and placed on the tree to remind any guest in our home of the true message of Christ. It was to be perfect.

That same year, my first in ministry, long about the second week in December, I visited an older woman in my congregation. She lived in a one room apartment in a run down house in the inner city of Toledo, Ohio. She had worked her entire life as a cook and raised a family as a single mother. To say that she had very little was to overstate the case. In the corner of that one room stood the most bedraggled excuse for an artificial Christmas tree I have ever seen. It was about three feet tall and twisted into an odd shape from years of use. The colored lights were garish and the thread bare ornaments were as worn out as her life appeared to be on the surface, but as we talked and as she shared her story, I began to have a religious

experience which to this day I have no other way of explaining than to say that she took me on a trip to Bethlehem. As I got up to leave, she struggled with her walker over to that woe begotten tree and reached up and took off a small glass ornament shaped like a pine cone covered with glitter and chipped purple paint. She handed it to me and asked me to hang it on my Christmas tree and to remember her. In the eyes of perfection, it was hideous. It was an affront to my narrow idea of the perfect Christmas tree.

But then, do you remember the story of the wise ones and the perfect gifts they took to the manger? They took perfection, but did you ever wonder about the gift they received? They came there with the perfect wealth of the world, gifts of earthly perfection, they went home with the gift of unconditional love. They went home with a story which transformed their lives. Lesson five: when it comes to Christmas trees and when it comes to life, it's not about the looks, it's about the love.

That ugly purple ornament found a home on my perfectly trimmed gold and white Christmas tree and in the years to follow, it was joined by all sorts of odd ornaments. One year two small hand prints on brightly colored construction paper were hung on that tree. Another year some brightly colored Santas hand-made with cotton balls and sticks. And then came the animals made with play dough and an amazing collection of the strikingly miscellaneous offering of

friends and students and congregation members. The ideal perfection I had imagined as the perfect Christian Christmas tree began to give way to something much more human and because it was so much more human, it was much more divine. Lesson six, labeling something Christian does not make it so and the larger the label the weaker the truth. Right now too many people in this wonderful land of ours are using the Christian label to rouse our meaner spirits and spread a pervasive negativity. Don't be fooled, it is not the label, any more than it is the size or the shape or the color coordination of the tree—the truth is the caring love, the forgiving heart, the tolerant and open mind, alive to the truth of God's unconditional love for all of humanity.

In our home, and I hope in your home, the Christmas tree stands as a symbol for our life journey. It celebrates not perfection, but love. Love born long ago in Bethlehem, and love reborn wherever people care. Our tree is a symbol that one day that love will be completed in the reign of God. And it is an invitation, to be ready, to be prepared to welcome the one who has promised to come again and to work in our lives for that day of perfect peace and harmony for all of God's children. Amen.