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WE'RE STILL AT BAT IN 2013

by Pastor Clarissa Martinelli

Adapted from Vince Gerhardy

A dad was late to his son's little league baseball game. Upon arriving he ran to the dugout and asked his son the score. The boy said, "Eighteen to nothing. They're winning." The father shaking his head said, "Well. Don't be discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" the son answered. "We haven't gotten to bat yet!"

I feel like that's how this year has started off for many of us thus far. Many of you have gone through all sorts of serious issues concerning your health, your families, and your finances. I want to tell you it may seem it's eighteen to nothing, but we haven't batted yet. We will win.

We have welcomed in the third month of 2013. It is a good opportunity to reflect on what kind of year has 2013 been for you? Where would you place it on a scale of 1 – 10?

Maybe you would give 2013 an 8 or 9 out of 10 – in other words, it been a really good year thus far. It has been a good year because you had success in your business, a good start at work or at school, good family relationships and new friendships.

2013 has already witnessed new accomplishments, new challenges, completed tasks, and an early spring.

Or maybe you rate 2013 as an 8 out of ten compared to the previous year, which was a horrible year.

Or maybe you would already give 2013 a 5. It has started off as just another year, pretty much the same as any other year. Nothing very exciting has happened; in fact, it began as dull and dreary. Just getting up, going to work, coming home, going to bed and then doing the same thing the next day and the next and the next.

Maybe 2013 deserves only 2 out of 10. That's because has been a dreadful three months. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. The year has already included tragedy, sickness, loss of friends, marriage problems, the kids are just impossible, even a death in your family.

How would you rate 2013 thus far?

Martin and I are hoping that as the Salem Family moves forward into 2013, there will be a change in the score. We're hoping this year we'll get to bat and everything will be better for all. I don't know if the changing of the year has anything to do with changing how life rolls out, but I do know God has everything to do with how life rolls out. We serve the God of hope, so we're putting our trust in God.

Romans 15:13 *May the GOD OF HOPE fill you with all joy and peace as you TRUST IN HIM, so that you may overflow with HOPE by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Think back and check what kind of a person you were during 2012. Were there some regrets? If you were able to have some part of last year over again, how would you have behaved differently? Would you have shown more understanding, cared more, been more patient, less critical, been more supportive and helpful? As I reflect on last year, I certainly would have done some things differently.

How about your relationship with God? Is it flourishing and growing during 2013 or is it just hovering in much the same place as it did the previous year, or perhaps it even went backwards as you prayed less, gave less, and even worshipped less. Maybe God doesn't have a big part to play in your life thus far; somehow God has just slipped into the background.

You could well ask the question how much did my life reflect the fact that I am God's child? did I speak as a child of God? did I act with the love of God in my heart? did I interact with others with the same love and forgiveness that Jesus has shown toward me?

As we stand on the threshold of another year, Jesus tells us a parable. It's brief but the point is clear.

"Listen," Jesus says. "A man has a fig tree and plants it in his vineyard. (Apparently it was common for fruit trees to be planted among the vines). Three years later he's making his way up and down his vineyard, he is looking forward to the taste of a ripe fig, but he sees that the fig tree still doesn't have any fruit. He calls to his gardener, 'Hey! Get over here. Why is this tree still here? It's taking up soil and moisture and space. Cut it down, *right now*.'" "

Jesus asked the question -

Why should that tree remain standing? Why should it keep taking up space, using up the goodness of the soil if it's serving no purpose? What's the point of having a tree that should bear fruit but does nothing?

Maybe you've had a tree in your garden that was a big disappointment and you put an axe to it or dug it out roots and all.

"Cut it down, right now was the owner's answer. The owner has a right to be disappointed and angry at that useless tree. It's no wonder he wants it destroyed. But as we listen to Jesus' story, we know Jesus isn't just talking about a fig tree. He's talking about you and me. We are led to ask ourselves, "Am I bearing fruit? I keep sucking up the nutrients of the soil in which I've been planted, and when am I going to show some kind of fruit to match the years I've been standing in God's garden and all the opportunities I've been given?"

Jesus takes a breath and continues. "Leave it alone for one more year," the gardener pleads. "I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

And with that, Jesus ends his story of the fig tree leaving his listeners to ponder the generosity, the patience, and the grace of the gardener. They are struck by the words of the gardener when he says, "Leave it alone." The word used by Jesus here also means "forgive." They know now that Jesus wasn't simply telling a story about a fig tree, but he was talking about God and the way he forgives us even though we don't deserve such generosity and kindness.

You see, God has given us some wonderful soil for growth. In **Colossians** chapter 2 verses 6 and 7 we are told, *"You have accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord. Now keep on following him. Plant your roots in Christ and let him be the foundation for your life. Be strong in your faith, just as you were taught. And be grateful."*

As God's people we build our lives on Jesus. Our very existence, our day-to-day living, our every breathing moment has its source in him. We occupy valuable space in the garden. The soil is rich and our roots are there and the owner of the garden is looking for fruit. God wants to see in us the kind of fruit that he would expect to see from someone who has been made new and holy through the blood of Jesus; from someone who has been given a new life by the living Jesus.

Jesus has seen the arguments, the inability to be generous when it comes to forgiveness and reconciliation, the lack of gratitude to our parents, the disrespect of our children, the disconnection between the church and us and what God offers through his church.

He's seen it all as it has unfolded much to our embarrassment. And he's forgiven it all. We've heard his words every Sunday as he says to us, 'Your sins are forgiven!'

We've been assured of that each time we've come to the Lord's Supper.

How many could use an *"overflow with hope"*? Our being filled with and overflowing with *hope* is dependent upon putting our *trust in him*. I can do that. I must, and I believe you can do it, too. Sometimes that's all we can do.

It was interesting to me as I began thinking about what I wanted to share today, I thought how Jesus, in his darkest and seemingly most hopeless time with the score eighteen to nothing, met with people he loved and instituted the New Covenant and brought hope for the future through communion. Only hours from his arrest and execution, we read,

Luke 22:14-20 *When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."...And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is THE NEW COVENANT in my blood, which is poured out for you."*

It would be through the Communion of the New Covenant that hope would spring. Only hours after this, the disciples would be at their most hopeless moment. Their Lord would be arrested, executed by crucifixion and buried. It would seem everything they thought and dreamed happening concerning all Jesus told them and the kingdom coming was only a dream. However, through communion, Jesus planted hope deep within them, and hope would shortly come alive. Our hope is alive.

Jesus said, *"Do this in remembrance of me."* A major element of communion is remembering him. When we go into *"remembrance"* mode, we're looking into the past. We remember what he did for us on the cross, but not only on the cross. We remember all God has done for us personally. We remember all those bad times

when the score was eighteen to nothing, but somehow you rallied and won. It's when we remember the past we can confidently move into the future where we come up to bat.

Yes, the year has started off a little hectic and chaotic for us and for many, but when I remember, I've seen families reconciled. I've seen physical healings take place. I've seen financial miracles happen. I've seen people come to Jesus in a way they never had before. I believe that our Salem Family is trusting and believing in the Holy Trinity and we are making a difference in the lives of people Western Kenosha County. All of that's exciting to me. The score sometimes isn't eighteen to nothing. It's really 100 to nothing, but we're winning. As I remember, my hope overflows. I have joy and peace because my Savior is alive.

What magnificent love God shows us! God really thinks we're special. God's love is so precious to us especially when we have cried out in despair and pain and we need the reassurance that everything will be all right!

How many of us have really felt down, really alone. We've spent restless nights in our beds and the morning has brought no relief. And someone has helped us! A telephone call, a letter, a word, an arm around our shoulders, and we've been uplifted! Perhaps a sermon, a devotion, a hymn or song has reassured us and given us hope!

But how deaf we've been to the loneliness and confusion and despair all around us?

"Give the tree one more year," the gardener in the vineyard said. The owner wanted to chop it down, but the gardener isn't going to give up. He's going to dig around it, turn over the soil, add some fertilizer, show it some more TLC and give it another chance! Isn't that just typical of the Spirit of God? The soil may be brown and hard-baked, but he's going to send rain. There's going to be a change. The gardener is determined and he's going to see to it!

Listen to what Jesus tells us in **John chapter 15:5** *"Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me."* The key is to be connected to Jesus. He is the one who can enable us to be what we ought to be. We need him to help our branches bear fruit. Without Jesus, we will rate each year that passes below 5 on the 1 to 10 scale!

Everyday we are inclined to want to break the relationship that God has with us

and to turn our back on the way he wants us to be as his children. We are like the fig tree that fails to produce good fruit. Thank God for the patience and grace of the gardener.

Jesus gives himself for us. He becomes the manure, the fertilizer for us as he is rejected, laughed at, crucified as a criminal. On the cross, nails, thorn-spikes and spear dig into him. He waters the ground with his own blood. He does everything. We do nothing. We simply trust in his grace. In Christ, we are made beautiful, fruitful gardens.

He digs around so that the love of God pours out of us and begins to work in us, and we become lovely people, through Jesus! With his kind of fertilizer we begin to love and live like Christ.

The parable about the fig tree makes it quite clear that we have been unfruitful, unfaithful, yet in spite of our lack of fidelity, God is faithful.

Be sure of this: Jesus waits for us, garden tools in hand, wheelbarrow by his side, ready to bring us through 2013. That's a promise. Armed with that promise, we can step forward ready to let Jesus do the work in us that only he can do. Thanks to him for his goodness in giving you, giving us, one more year of grace!

As you come to communion today, recline at the table with the Lord, as it were. Go into remembrance mode. Take a moment and remember how God always came through for you. Put your *trust* in the *God of hope* and look forward. You will confidently move into your future. It's your turn to bat in 2013.

Amen, amen, amen.