

WHO GIVES A FIG?
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luke 13: 6-9

Then he told this parable: A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”

He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

I am betting that I would not be too far off the mark if I suggested that most of us have not thought about figs in the past week, or month, or even year. But if you lived in the ancient Middle East you would know that figs were an essential fruit in agriculture, commerce, diet, and was even thought to have medicinal values. The fig was used as a poultice for boils. A large fig has about 50 calories and a bowl of figs would be a generous breakfast in terms of caloric intake. Figs were made into cakes for Roman soldiers and could be stored for long military campaigns. Like all trees the fig tree offers shade, a precious respite in a harsh climate.

Because of its value it is not too difficult for us to imagine that the fig tree was a symbol in the life of Israel. The fig tree is a tree of blessing. It stands for Israel's past and its promising future. The expectation is that a fig tree would bear fruit. Like the fig tree it is expected that the nation of Israel would also bear fruit. For the family farmer the fig tree was a sign of prosperity and peace. A barren fig tree is not only a problem for the farmer but a sign of disgrace on the nation.

Barrenness is typically associated with women and is a sign of shame and curse. There are several images of barrenness in the Old Testament, including Sarah and Rachael. In both their cases God intervened and they brought forth children.

The parable that Jesus told of the fig tree is that of a barren tree. The owner of the tree wants to cut the tree down because the tree has not born fruit after three years. The fact of the matter is that fig trees take up to five years to reach maturity. After they begin fruiting they can bear up to 50 years.

So we might think that the landowner is a little impatient. But on the other hand, arable land in the ancient Middle East was a precious commodity. Every fertile inch of soil was cherished and not to be exhausted by a tree that was drawing strength and sustenance from the ground but not returning a crop. Farming has always operated on the margins and a wise farmer will shrewdly manage every resource from soil to water and manure to labor. This is a common practice in agriculture today. What happens to the cow that no longer produces milk or produces below weight? Even on our little place we have to ask what to do with the chickens that quit laying eggs.

So the landowner's concern is really a pretty reasonable one in the world of agriculture. If he did not think about such problems and move them to resolution he would not only be thought a fool but would soon go out of business.

The gardener is also an agricultural economist. His response to the landowner is pretty crafty. You can imagine that this man was the one who planted the tree in the first place. He undoubtedly knew more about fig trees than the owner, knowing, for example, that another two years might be required for the tree to bear. He had tended

the tree and knew something of the time and work that had already been invested in it. He was prepared to continue to nurture and fertilize it. He might have been thinking that it would be wasteful to dig out this initial investment and replant it and wait another three years for a harvest. We note that he offers to continue to care for the tree and then says to the landowner, "If it bears fruit next year, well and good; if not you can cut it down." He did not say, "I will cut it down," or "You can have it cut down." Perhaps it would be understood that the gardener is the hand of the landowner and in all likelihood it would be the gardener who would have to cut it down. But I think there is an interesting shift of responsibility in his tone. He sets himself apart from the impatient landowner.

Now what if we take this issue of productivity and usefulness out of the realm of botany and animal husbandry and apply it to humans? Jesus is, after all, talking about the Kingdom of God.

I suspect that there is not a person in this room who has ever had an employee and not been faced with this dilemma. Every once in a while there are employees who do not do their share of the work, or meet their quotas, or the quality of their work is abysmal. It is the most natural and responsible thing in the world to let those persons go. You know the saying, "It's time to cut our losses." Or, "Don't throw good money after bad."

Corporations, social institutions, churches, and even families are sometimes populated with people who only take and never give back to the community. This is also the case in our social relationships. We meet people who will suck out all of the

nutrition and strength from other people but never replenish or restore the source of their social capital.

You may have had the experience of a friendship where you are the friend but the other really is not. You make all of the contacts, inquire during times of trouble, arrange for conversation and entertainment but the gestures are never reciprocated. You make room on your calendar for them and their needs but they are seldom, if ever, available for even a quiet conversation. Your relationship with them is something like a barren fig tree. And you are prone to say, “Who gives a fig?” about them.

These kinds of realities confront us every day. It is the most natural response in the world to suggest we cut down the fig tree, put the hen in the stew pot, fire the lazy employee, and sever a one-sided relationship. The question of the fig tree and the Kingdom of God confronts us with a different set of values. The gardener creates a tension in the story that does not have a conclusion. He proposes hopeful action for a seemingly hopeless cause. Brandon Scott argues, “Pleading in the face of a hopeless cause is the basis of hope. The ellipsis of the present is the possibility for the future.”¹ Scott further suggests that the Kingdom of God is found in the ellipses of hopeful incompleteness where our responsibility is to continue to dig around the tree and fertilize it, uncertain of the outcomes.

I understand that is not how a lot of people imagine the Kingdom of God. They think that the Kingdom of God is a place where everyone has come to some kind of solid conclusion about faith, and God, and Jesus. They suppose that the Kingdom

¹ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 338.

of God is a place where there is only faith and no doubt. They could not imagine God's Kingdom as anything less than a community where everyone for everyone offers up every talent and gift. Surely everyone in the Kingdom of God is fruitful! Everyone is productive and blessing follows after blessing.

But Jesus offers a narrative that calls those assumptions into question. What if the Kingdom of God is a place where not everyone has much to show for their lives? What if the Kingdom of God is a community where none of us are fully productive? What if we cannot or will not "be all that we can be" in the Kingdom of God? And most importantly, what if the Kingdom of God is a waiting room? Or, the Kingdom of God is the kind of community where the patient nurturing of other human beings is its primary function?

I was listening to Emily playing the clarinet the other day. She has only been playing since last September. As I listened I realized that she was hitting every note. She played without the squeaking and squawking that I had heard six months ago. Instead she blew the rich tonal notes of the clarinet.

I cannot imagine being a Middle School band instructor. It is hard enough to listen to one child play an instrument for the first time. But can you imagine a dozen or so in the same room at the same time? On top of that throw in all of the new trumpeters, trombonists, piccolo and flute players. And think of the incessant playing of "Go Tell Aunt Rhodie," "Hot Cross Buns," and "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." I should think that would make you want to cut something down and throw it in the fire!

But the band instructor knows that patience, practice, and more practice and patience is how children learn to play an instrument. Miraculously the fall holiday

concert comes together and almost everybody hits the right notes at almost the right time. By the time the spring concert rolls around “Hot Cross Buns” has given way to “Ode to Joy,” with soloists and section specials. The children are nurtured as they are taught. Indeed, it will be more than five years in most cases before the full fruits of talent will be heard.

I think the gardener in Jesus’ parable of the fig tree had read Moliere who said, “The trees that are slow to grow bear the best fruit.” The community of faith, if it claims to share the values of God’s Kingdom, is the place “cut your losses” is replaced by “dig and fertilize.”

I am reminded of the Chassidic story of the man who once complained to Rabbi Wolf that some of the Chassid in their village had begun playing cards all night long.

“That is good,” said the zaddik. “Like all people they want to serve God and don’t know how. But now they are learning to stay awake and persist in doing something. When they have become perfect in staying awake all night then they can turn to God and do something perfect for God. Oh, what excellent servants they will make for God then!”²

Far too many Christians think that the purpose of the church is to condemn the imperfect and the barren, cut them down and cast them into the fire. When I hear that kind of language coming out of their mouths I know that they have not matured into the Kingdom values of God. Their souls are still barren. Like the wayward teenager, the alcoholic, the banal and the materialists of every church, the judgmental Christian

² This story is found in Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, editors, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 90.

needs a little patience and a little fertilizer. We need to dig around their roots, prune the dead branches, and wait until next year when they might begin to bear the real fruits of faith.

What are those fruits? Paul declared, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5: 22-23) And guess what? Those are the very qualities that will make those barren folks fruitful. The fruits of the spirit become the fertilizer of the barren soul. It will be love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and generosity, faithfulness and gentleness on our parts to nurture a life into gift bearing souls. I never knew of a life that became bountiful by any other qualities.

We are called to the Kingdom of God, to dig around the roots and fertilize, never certain of the fruits that the lives around us will bear. The fact is that we all need to grow and mature. We are even surprised sometimes by the new leaves, gorged buds, and fresh fruit we never knew we were capable of. Don’t concern yourself with who is barren and what should happen to them. Dig, fertilize, and when it happens, pick the fruit.

Mary Oliver suggests this life of nurturing in her poem, “Halleluiah.”

“Everyone should be born into this world happy
and loving everything.
But in truth it rarely works that way.
For myself, I have spent my life clamoring toward it.
Halleluiah, anyway I’m not where I started!

And have you too been trudging like that, sometimes
almost forgetting how wondrous the world is
and how miraculously kind some people can be?
And have you too decided that probably nothing important
is ever easy?

Halleluiah, I'm sixty now, and even a little more,
and some days I feel I have wings."³

So go home from this place, dear friends. Go out to your garden and dig around the
plants. Throw down a little manure. Gently wash the roots. Be patient for the fruits.

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³ Mary Oliver, "Halleluiah," *Evidence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), p. 19.