

A Time to Nurture
Luke 13:1-9
March 24, 2019 – Third Sunday in Lent

So Jesus told a parable. Parables were a common teaching tool in Jesus' time; and Jesus liked parables. In fact, historians have argued about which of the words in the Bible written 40 to 70 years after Jesus' death were truly spoken by our Lord. But virtually all agree that many of the 60 parables attributed to Jesus were indeed his authentic words to his followers almost 2000 years ago.

So Jesus says there was this fig tree in a man's orchard. Old and tired, it had not borne fruit for three years. And so, the owner of says to his gardener, "That old tree it just taking up real estate. It's draining nutrients from the soil, and I'm not getting anything in return. Cut it down." But the gardener, says to his boss, "Boss, give it one more year. I'll take some extra care of that tree. I'll till the soil around it, and fertilize it. I'll make sure it gets enough water and sunlight. I'll show it some tender loving care. Then, if it still doesn't produce any fruit, you can cut it down."

Now, obviously, when Jesus told this parable, he was not giving instructions in agriculture. By definition, all parables are similes or metaphors. And so I ask, "Where are you in this story? Where am I in this story?" Oh, there is an easy and traditional interpretation: The Father is the land owner; Jesus is the gardener; and we are the trees. Jesus will intercede with this Father and behalf of the trees, and Jesus will give us, his trees, tender loving care. That's very nice, but I have a couple problems with this interpretation. First, my personal view of the trinity is too unitarian to make this extreme contrast between the Father and the Son. My God is a loving and merciful God; and I don't believe that my God would advocate for cutting anyone down. Secondly, as those of you who have taken Bible studies know, I never want to adopt a narrow view of scripture. I never want to say, "Scripture means this: plain, simple, period." The beauty of scripture is the wideness of its interpretation. Scripture has sometimes be compared to a baseball field. There is a left foul line, and there is a right foul line. Some interpretations are clearly "out of bounds"; but there's a whole area from right field to left field, a whole wideness of valid interpretation; and that's the joy I find in scripture. And, nowhere is that fair zone wider than in the parables.

And so, for a moment let's set that traditional interpretation aside, as I ask again, where are we in this parable. Are we the landowner, sick and tired of this homely old fig tree taking up space and giving us nothing in return? Are we the loving gardener, caring for the tree, nurturing it, seeing to its needs so it can bear fruit? Or are we the tree – tired, worn, struggling just to survive? And my answer is "Yes." At different times, and in different circumstances most of us have played all three roles, sometimes appropriately and sometimes totally inappropriately.

Sometimes it's entirely too easy to play the land owner. If things aren't going well, I'll cut them off. I will never forget a co-worker coming to me, I'll call

her Janet. I had known Janet for a number of years – a single mother with a teenage daughter, and good church-goer, a very caring individual. One day Janet came to me to tell me that she was getting married. I was shocked. “Janet,” I said, “are you sure you’re ready to do that. You’ve only known this guy for a couple months.” Janet replied, “Well, if it doesn’t work, I’ll get a divorce.” I loved Janet. I generally respected Janet; but, in this case, I was heartbroken. I was truly heartbroken that Janet would take the institution of marriage so casually. “I’ll plant the tree; but, if it doesn’t bear fruit, I’ll cut it down.”

I generally have a lot of respect for the Millennial Generation. I respect their return to simplicity. I respect their heart for mission and outreach. But I’m not sure I respect their lack of loyalty to their employers. Now don’t hear this as, “They are disloyal.” They are extremely loyal, while working for the employer. But they think nothing of switching jobs every few years. I switched careers after my first three years out of college. I would have fit right in with the Millennials. But I stayed with my next employer for 24 years; and I’ve now been employed by the United Methodist Church for fifteen years. Millennials just would not understand that. If the tree is not bearing as much fruit as we think it should, we cut it down.

But then there are the gardeners. Kind, peace-loving, caring individuals. The gardeners care for every individual. They are the pacifists. They are willing to put in the extra work, tilling the soil, digging in the fertilizer, carrying the water. It’s easy to see the gardeners as the “good people,” but sometimes the gardeners are unrealistically good – refusing to accept the inevitable, constantly trying when there is little hope of success. I confess that I tend to be a gardener. I think most clergy tend to be gardeners. I praise the gardeners for their love of all the trees, young and old, healthy and ill. I praise the gardeners for their hard work. Gardeners also sometimes need a healthy dose of realism. Oh, by the way, did you hear the text. The land owner told the gardener to cut the tree down. The gardener asked for another year to nurture the tree. Then the gardener told the land owner, “If the tree still does not produce, *you* can cut it down.” The gardener did not say, “I will cut it down.” The gardener will not take an axe to his beloved tree – he tells the land owner that he, the land owner can cut it down.

And, of course, then there are the trees. Some trees bear a lot of fruit, some bear a little fruit, and some bear no fruit at all. And, isn’t that life. But notice the gardener never blames the tree. Perhaps the tree doesn’t bear fruit for a lack of nutrients, or a lack of air, or a lack of water. Friends, we all need spiritual enrichment if we are to bear fruit.

But we are not trees. We have the ability to search out the nourishment, the enrichment. And so, in the midst of Lent, I ask each of us, you and me, “Are we bearing fruit, or are we simply taking up space. Are we seeking out the enrichment we need, the prayer life, the Bible study, the meditation, the peace and the calm.

I’ve thought a lot about this parable, especially in light of the recent General Conference. There are those who would have us cut the tree down. There are

those who would say our tree is no longer bearing fruit. And there are those like me that want to give it another year, to till the soil and spread the fertilizer, to water and nurture the church; and see if it will bear fruit.

I've thought about this parable. I've thought about where we, not just as United Methodists but as human beings, where should we rightly fit into the story; and I submit. . . On some level, we are all trees. Some of us bear a lot of fruit, and some a little, and some none at all. But thank heaven for gardeners. The gardeners provide us with nourishment, room to grow, to thrive, and to the limits of our abilities to bear fruit. And it seems to me that, as we bear fruit, we eventually become gardeners, tilling the soil and fertilizing other trees so they can bear fruit; and that is truly a joy. Do you get the feeling that the gardener in a parable loves his work? Do you get the feeling that he will lovingly care for this poor tree. I submit, that is the call of Christ. The call of Christ is love. The call of Christ is to be Christ-like.

So what do we do with the land owner. Jesus does not "finish" his story; and that's often the case with a parable. We can only assume that he give the gardener the year that the gardener requested. So you see, the gardener asked for mercy on behalf of the tree; and the gardener received his mercy.

Friends, I don't have all the answers to this parable. Parables were designed to be open-ended, to not have a single interpretation or a single answer. I don't have all the answers for the United Methodist Church, or for the ills of our society. But I do know, in the words of the Apostle Paul and our lectionary reading of about six weeks ago that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. And so, I will continue to play the gardener, to share the love of Christ in every way I can, at every time I can, to everyone I can; because I truly believe that the love of God is the greatest gift in the world; and I believe that as baptized Christians, each and every one of us is called to share that love.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,

We know that love bears all things,

believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

and we know that love is stronger than hate.

So teach us to love all people at all times in all circumstances.

Amen.

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