

“In Need of Manure and Patience”

March 7, 2010

Isaiah 55:1-3a, 8-11

Luke 13:1-9

So who are *you* in 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?’ But the gardener 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.’

So who *are* you in Jesus’ parable? Are you the impatient, hungry, demanding landowner? Do you look at what other people seem to have made of their lives – or, more to the point, *not* made of their lives – say to yourself, “What a waste!” and then decide that “those” people, whoever they are, are just plain hopeless? No? You don’t? Not even with your neighbor and his rundown house, your drug addicted in-law or sibling, or the homeless man who smells strongly of alcohol and even more strongly of urine and other bodily secretions?

Maybe, instead, you’re the gardener. Do you see *possibility* where so many others see only limitation and failure? Are you ready to try to buy someone else some time, get your hands dirty and your back sore, and try to nurture new life in a place or a person where there seems to be no life at all?

Perhaps you’re the fig tree in the parable, the apparently unfruitful focus of someone else’s expectation and need. Do you go for seemingly long stretches of time, feeling as if you’re stuck, feeling as if you’re not living the life you wanted to be living and knowing you’re not living the life your family or friends think you should be living?

You could even be the soil. Are you unobtrusive? Do you keep a low profile, staying in the background – or in the ground – and making someone else’s showier life possible? Do you nurture the beauty and development of other people in ways that they may not even notice? Do you help family, friends, and strangers find the nourishment they need to develop good roots and grow ever stronger?

Do you see yourself in any of these roles – landowner, gardener, fig tree, or soil? Most of the time? Some of the time? Every now and then? Never? Well, if none of these seems to sound much like you, there is one more possibility. There’s one more character in this parable, one more protagonist you might see yourself in. And that character is ... well ... that character is the manure.

So you might be the manure. And if you are, what does that mean? Well, you might be a little smelly ... or not. You might *be* or you might *offer* something that many people will reject, out of hand, because it’s too messy, too unglamorous, too *earthy*. (Let’s be honest: if you’re the manure, you *are* unglamorous!) You’re humble in the root sense of the word – of the earth – you may not welcome in many places, but you are

*absolutely necessary*. If you're the manure, you bring the nutrients necessary for fruitful soil and a fruit-bearing fig tree.

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The parable of the fig tree is only one of several dozen that Jesus tells in the gospels. It's easy to understand why he used parables so often: they're great teaching tools. They're short, memorable, and entertaining in their own way. But parables are much more than stories in which we can imagine ourselves being one or more of the characters. Jesus told parables using familiar aspects of daily life in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine – vineyards, landowners, gardeners, and fruit trees; priests, Levites, and Samaritans; sheep and coins that go missing; impatient sons and resentful sons; seeds falling on rocks and on good soil. Taking those familiar, predictable ingredients, Jesus then told stories in which people did unreasonable, unexpected, illogical things.

Over and over again, with those unreasonable, unexpected, illogical parable twists, Jesus taught and still teaches his followers that God, the Spirit of All Life itself, does not act in ways that conform to human expectations and human values. Over and over again, Jesus taught and teaches that God does not love and bless in the limited way human beings love and bless. In other words, in and through Jesus, in and through Jesus' parables, God proclaimed to 1<sup>st</sup> century listeners the same thing God had proclaimed through Isaiah more than 500 years earlier: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways."

Now, let's return to the parable of the fig tree. Try to imagine how Jesus' listeners might have heard it. Remember that arable soil in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea was – and is – quite limited. Remember that rainfall was – and is – quite limited. And realize that a vineyard owner would want and probably need all of his land to be productive to be able to feed his family and pay his gardener and other workers.

So remember that it's in this land and culture that Jesus tells a story of a decidedly unproductive fig tree. Jesus describes a fruit tree that has failed to produce anything of value for not one or two years, but for three years. The disciples and crowds listening as this story unfolded must have sympathized with the landowner, thinking that they would join him in ordering the unproductive, hopeless, wasteful tree to be removed, so that something useful could come from the soil and the water that had been "wasted" on the fig tree for three years.

Into this ordinary and, so far as what the landowner wants to do, perfectly understandable scenario, Jesus introduces the gardener. The gardener resists the landowner's reasonable, expected instructions and pleads for an unreasonable, unexpected opportunity to give the fig tree another chance to become a healthy, fruit-bearing part of creation. And then Jesus ends the parable without ending it. We don't learn if the landowner acquiesces to the gardener's plea, and, assuming he does, we don't know if there will be any figs ripening on that tree in a year. Such is the mysterious, even frustrating nature of parables.

This short parable still has legs. It still teaches. And as it comes around in the lectionary every three years, it still offers a deeply-needed word of life and love. Now, perhaps you wonder whether this parable can be relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century inhabitants of *this* land of vineyards and gardeners. If you do wonder, you need look no further than two months ago, when the Board for the Sonoma Valley Unified School District was struggling with balancing a budget with greatly reduced income. As the Board weighed

its options and tried to be fair, wise, and prudent, one Valley resident objected to the Board's efforts to preserve the programs of the alternative high school, known as "Creekside." In urging cuts that would have ended those programs, this resident wrote that the teenagers in Creekside were there because they had already "failed" the schools – by getting in trouble with the law or the school administration, by being unable to keep up with their school work, and/or by getting pregnant. Since these kids had already "failed" the school system, this resident argued, they certainly didn't deserve any extra help and perhaps didn't deserve any further attention from the school system at all.

Into that very human and very predictable human response to others' "failure" and poor choices, the voice of God comes through Isaiah, "Your thoughts are not my thoughts, and your ways are not my ways." The voice of the Spirit of Life comes through Jesus: "Do not cut those children off. Let me tend them and care for them, giving them love, nourishment, and hope. And then let us see if they bear the fruit of learning, responsibility, and possibility."

In the parable of the fig tree, a parable of patience and possibility, Jesus is echoing the words spoken through the prophet Isaiah in this morning's first reading: "Ho, *everyone* who thirsts, come to the waters." The Word spoken through Isaiah is not, "Ho, everyone who thirsts through no fault of their own, come to the waters." The Word spoken through Isaiah is *not*, "Ho, everyone who has played by the rules, come to the waters." It is *not*, "Ho, everyone who done justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly with me, come to the waters." No, the Word is, "*Everyone* who thirsts;" *everyone* who is in need, lost, and hungry; everyone who is poor or prosperous; everyone who is joyous or in despair, everyone who is fruitful or fruitless – everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Come and eat. Come and know that you are loved.

There is good news, my beloveds, in this parable. There is very good news ... and there is also very challenging news. Hear the good news: even when we have been barren for years – lost, angry, confused, self-absorbed, paralyzed by fear or by greed – there is a gardener, the Holy, Everlasting Spirit, who is offering us the kind of new life that only manure and patience can bring to a fruit tree. The good news, to paraphrase the words of the United Church of Christ, is this: no matter who you are, where you are on life's journey, or what you have or haven't done, God is ready to welcome you home and tend you as a patient gardener tends a beloved garden.

Do not doubt that this is indeed good, life-saving news. [Pick up scraggly plant.] Aren't there times when we are this bedraggled, this in need of fertilizer, this in need of care and patience? Aren't there times when we find ourselves this lacking in vitality, this unpromising, as the result of what other people have done – like the Galileans whom Pilate had had killed in the temple? Aren't there also times when we find ourselves this puny, this unfruitful, as the result of circumstances or bad luck, like the eighteen killed without warning by the falling tower of Siloam? And aren't there, as well, times when we find ourselves this straggly, this in need of help, as a result of our own bad choices and foolish decisions?

Yet, no matter what the causes of our need, our puniness, our lack of fruit, the voice of the Spirit calls to us and says, "Come to the waters. Come and eat." The Spirit calls and says, "Let me care for you. Let me give you the nourishment you need, and let me help you find your way back to a life of fruit and fruitfulness."

Now, this good news is *gospel* good news. Being *gospel* good news, it brings with it *challenging* news, as well. The challenging news is this: we are called to come out of our impatient landowner selves. We are called to come out of our judgmental landowner selves who are ready to give up on the family members, friends, strangers, or enemies whose lives seem to us lost or wasted. We are called to come out of our self-righteous selves, to get our hands dirty and break a sweat, as we get working as holy gardeners, channels of life-giving manure and patience. The Holy Spirit may be the source of nourishment, care, and the gift of time, but the Spirit needs our hands, our hearts, and our willingness to bring those gifts into the world.

When – not *if* – when we find ourselves playing the role of the impatient landowner, so ready to give up on someone else, may we surrender to God the gardener who loves and seeks to nourish everyone.

When we find ourselves with a chance to play the role of the patient, manure-providing gardener, may we give thanks for the role, roll up our sleeves, and get to work.

And when we find ourselves playing the role of the fruitless tree, may we be blessed by a gardener in our midst who offers the gift of rich manure and loving patience.  
Amen.

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