

“The Nurturing Steward”

Luke 13:6-9

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A parable is a parable and is not an allegory. In an allegory, every character and every property is a symbol of something beyond itself. The Bible student must examine each detail of the story to determine what it represents. A parable is different. With a parable, the Bible reader takes the story as a whole, is not fixated on what each detail might represent, but sees the story as a whole illustrating one important truth.

The story of the unproductive fig tree is, indeed, a parable, not an allegory. Though the landowner and the steward and the tree and the manure are all intriguing unto themselves, the challenge is to see the story as a whole and to glean the one truth Jesus is illustrating. What he's always trying to illustrate is what life looks like when it's lived as God hopes it will be lived.

So we have this word picture of a landowner, probably an absentee landowner, come out to inspect the property. I picture him with wingtips and a fancy cape, maybe a Sherlock Holmes hat, maybe a gold watch and a chain. He quickly identifies the one fig tree that hasn't met the production quota and gives the execution order. Cut it down. The steward of the farm, dressed in bib overalls and rubber boots, strokes his chin as if to buy a little time, suggests a plan B: cultivate around it another year, add some super-grow, maybe sing to it, pray over it, give it more time. The landowner gives in to the wisdom of the steward and the tree has been granted a reprieve.

Everyone breathes easy, at least for the time being. Are you getting the big picture of his parable? It has to do with urgency tempered by patience.

As we read through the first chapters of Luke's Gospel, we sense there is a mounting urgency about Jesus' ministry. He seems to know he is headed toward a cross and an early death. He has a "to-do" list that's a mile long. It includes training disciples, unveiling a new understanding of salvation, leading his community to a level of caring never before imagined. The clock is ticking. Time is pressing in on him. There are days when he wants to pull his hair out because the disciples just aren't getting it! He looks at the calendar and he grieves, for his disciples are still arguing amongst themselves over who is the greatest. He's been hoping that his unconditional way of loving the unlovable would catch on like wild fire! But that isn't happening. It's happening more like honey running down the backside of a cold butter knife. He's a little discouraged by the lack of fruit, but he knows that patience will pay off down the road. Patience is what the doctor ordered.

So he tells the disciples this little parable about an unproductive fig tree. The initial feeling that emanates out of the parable is one of urgency. Let's get a move on! The tree isn't bearing any fruit – let's cut it down! I can relate to that.

I spent two of my college summers working as a camp counselor at Woodbrook Camp for Boys in Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire. The director, a guy named Roy, would inevitably stumble upon a group of loafing counselors. He would see all the work that needed doing, and he'd shout out, "Hubba hubba!" That meant, "Let's get going! There's work to be done! Hubba hubba!"

But the urgency of Jesus' ministry is not an urgency at all costs, not a 'put your pedal to the metal and God help anyone who gets in the way' kind of urgency.

It was a compassionate urgency that allowed for people to move at their own pace, for individuals to catch the drift of living by faith according to their own circumstances.

I'm already looking forward to singing the Easter hymn that proclaims:

In the bulb there is a flower
In the seed, an apple tree;
In cocoons a hidden promise:
 butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
 there's a spring that waits to be,
 unrevealed until its season,
 something God alone can see.

“Something God alone can see.” There is an urgency about getting along with Christ's ministry; living by faith, establishing that community of peace; grounding ourselves in Biblical justice; YET, there is a call for patience; there is an understanding that some things can't be rushed; that some things will blossom in their own season, and that is all right. When life is lived as God hopes for it to be lived, urgency is tempered by patience.

The steward in the parable says, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around, and put manure on it.” I like this guy!

I can't help thinking of this fig tree parable applying to a public school. Yes, there's an urgency about every child learning to read and to do algebra and to master biology and to get into Harvard. But there are students who matter just as much as all the rest who have learning disabilities, who learn in a different way, who may never be Rhode Scholars, but who will blossom in their own season, in their own time. I am so grateful for Mr. Piazza who understood that about me.

When I was failing English and math and physics and history all in the same semester, he let it be known I was doing just fine in French! He was the only one who seemed to understand the parable, to not judge too harshly, but to cultivate around the roots one more year, to be patient and nurturing. I thank God for that man every day!

I can't help thinking of this fig tree parable applying to parenting. We tend to place our children on some kind of a time line. I remember a nursery rhyme we all memorized years ago:

Solomon Grundy
Born on Monday
Christened on Tuesday
Married on Wednesday
Took ill on Thursday
Worse on Friday
Died on Saturday
Buried on Sunday
And that was the end of
Solomon Grundy!

Maybe not that concise; but parents do tend to hold an unspoken timeline in our minds. We'll hear someone say, "'Bout time she found a husband." "Grand kids 'll be coming along soon." "'Bout time that son of ours got a raise." "Daughter's left home and returned twice now. Maybe the third time's the charm." Parents want to see their children happy and wise and self-sustaining and preferably on the day after completing their education.

But the parable of the fig tree tempers the urgency with a loving patience. The fig tree says to parents: 'relax a bit; each child's path is different. Put aside those harsh judgments and the fruit will appear where it was barren before.'

I can't help thinking of the fig tree applying to life in a local church. I'd like to see someone create a fig tree banner that would hang from time to time in various locations throughout the building. It would be a banner suggestive of each person nurtured to bloom in his or her own season.

Faith is one of those mysteries that grows imperceptively, that grows beneath the surface, that grows when it looks like nothing is growing. Faith is not one of those gifts purchased on E-Bay and delivered by overnight express. Faith takes its own sweet time to be born in the human heart.

It can, I suppose, blossom quickly like one of those Christmas flowers that comes in a box and all you do is add water. More often than not, it is like the century cactus that shows its true colors once every 100 years or so!

In a local church, there can be an urgency about getting along with the matters of faith, living by faith, yet the fig tree invites a patience.

In Eagle Butte, one of our oldest citizens was a woman of frail body who walked with such obvious pain that it was painful just watching her take a few steps. Her name was Miss Balheim. I think her first name was Elizabeth, but I would have never called her by that name. To me, she was always Miss Balheim. She lived at the Eagle Butte Manor where many of the elders retired. An infrequent attendee of church services, she invited me to her apartment home one afternoon. She opened her family album and told me her life story.

Each entry seemed to represent a turning point: the death of her parents, her 8th grade graduation certificate, her favorite horse sporting a blue ribbon, a prize sunflower standing high over her head, a black and white picture of the sod hut where she had been raised, a recipe for chicken soup, a quotation from the Sermon on the Mount.

Then, Miss Balheim, seeming tired and worn out, looked at me and I looked back at her. She asked if she could be baptized now. She said she was ready. After all those years of hard living, she presented herself for the sacrament. It was an awkward moment for me, a young whippersnapper minister baptizing a woman from another era, a woman whose age would never be known to me, but whose life story revealed a journey of faith. I sprinkled the waters on her forehead, spoke the ancient words, and knew then, there are some things that can never be rushed.

Miss Balheim wore funny looking hats and clothing from a fashion era way before my time. I'm sure she had never heard of The Gap or Macy's or even Filenes's Basement. But she opened up the parable of the fig tree for me in a way no seminary professor ever could. She taught me to balance the urgency of life with patience for allowing the Spirit to work in its own time.

I invite you to carry this parable with you today. Bring your self to it. Let it speak to you. Be open to its truth and you shall have a glimpse of life as God intends it to be lived. In the greatest of hope, Amen!