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## Lent with Luke: 2. What's In Your Garden?

Luke 13:6-9

NRSV 6Then 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. 7So 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?' 8He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'

The Message 6-7 Then he told them a story: "A man had an apple tree planted in his front yard. He came to it expecting to find apples, but there weren't any. He said to his gardener, 'What's going on here? For three years now I've come to this tree expecting apples and not one apple have I found. Chop it down! Why waste good ground with it any longer?' 8-9 "The gardener said, 'Let's give it another year. I'll dig around it and fertilize, and maybe it will produce next year; if it doesn't, then chop it down.'"

As much as I love Eugene Petersen's Message version of the Bible, his version of our scripture for this morning clearly goes beyond translation and into paraphrase. For even the fruit-and-vegetable-challenged like me know the difference between a fig and an apple. Both have their admirers, although I must admit I would side with our daughter Katie who, after attending a church service once in California where figs were part of the chat and coffee time, later said to me that it reminded her of a wad of old wet cardboard, but not as tasty. The difference between a translation and a paraphrase is that a translator tries to stay close to the original texts and tries to render as faithfully as possible the words into a new language that is both accurate and will be understood by the audience. And while there is no absolute line between paraphrase and translation,

a paraphrase generally often **replaces** the words in the original language with ones the paraphraser thinks will better convey the larger point. So Petersen has gone beyond translation here because he clearly thinks that most Americans know apples and apple trees, but would not be as familiar with figs and fig trees – and he is probably right.

In any event, whether apple trees or fig trees, this little story from Luke, the second in our Lenten sermon series, is one of the many parables of Jesus to be found throughout the gospels. A couple of things: the word “parable” is not simply a fancy word for “story.” Yes, this and Jesus’ other parables tell brief stories but they are more than just that. It’s also important to remember that the parables of Jesus are not merely allegories. An allegory is a story where each of the characters or elements explicitly stands for something and where there is a moral lesson to be learned from the story. Think of Aesop’s Fables; think of, say, the tortoise and the hare, where each of those characters stands for certain kinds of approaches to life. And, most importantly when the fable is over, you’re supposed to have learned a life lesson that will make you a better person.

But Jesus’ parables are not fables, they’re not allegories, they’re not little morality plays with a neat lesson at the end. No, the difference between a fable, an allegory, and a parable is this: in a parable you are invited not to see the characters as standing for some particular virtues or vices; no, you are invited to see **yourself** in the characters and ask yourself how the world looks differently when you do so. But that means that sometimes parables will disturb us! But I think that’s why Jesus used them to teach, for you and I sometimes *need* to be a little shaken up, a little disturbed, and indeed parables are meant to make us think, to make us not quite so smug in our pat

and ready answers, maybe calling into question the lines we have drawn, the way we have divvied up our world into sometimes over-simple categories.

Now, that's all very abstract. Let's dig in, then, to this parable of the fruitless fig tree and see what it might have to teach us, how it might shake up our way of seeing things. I said earlier that the parables of Jesus invite us to identify with a character in the story; in fact, sometimes, they compel us to identify with characters we may not want to identify with but who nevertheless can teach us a lot about ourselves. Think for a second about one of Jesus' most troubling parables, that of the workers in the vineyard. You remember how it goes: over the course of the day a vineyard owner hires successive waves of workers to get the harvest done and then at the end of the day pays everyone the very same wage – the two hour worker gets the same as the 12 hour worker. In the very way this parable outrages us, we are reminded that while we almost invariably identify with the 12 hour workers, the truth is that we are often more like the two hour workers – flawed and late to the party – and yet God does not limit His grace to us. We may not want to see ourselves this way, but the parable forces us to realize that we aren't as good as we think we are and yet God does not measure out grace by how we have behaved.

So, back to the fruitless fig tree. There are several distinct characters in this parable: the vineyard owner, the gardener, the fig tree, the soil, and the water and fertilizer. The usual interpretation of the parable often goes like this: the gardener is the figure for God and we are the fruitless fig tree. And that gardener is full of grace and wants for you and me every opportunity for us to blossom, to bear fruit. That's a good and comforting and true thing to know. Thanks be to God that we do indeed worship a

God who seeks to give you and me every opportunity to bear fruit, who waters and fertilizes our lives, sometimes pruning the things that keep us stuck, but always hoping that we will bloom well.

And, as much as I find that interpretation a comfort and a hope, this morning I want us to try something a little different. I want us to change up those identifications and see what we can learn from them. Are you with me? Look at the parable again. After the gardener and the vineyard owner examine the fig tree, the gardener says that he will dig up the soil and he will put fertilizer on it. Now, while I don't know a lot about gardening – I could get a lot more interested if there were such things as bacon plants – even I know that soil that is hard-packed doesn't allow water to get to the roots of a plant and instead of nourishing the plant so it can grow, most of it runs off. And likewise with fertilizer – if you don't work the fertilizer into the soil, where it can really get to and benefit the plant that fertilizer will also simply run off the hard-packed soil instead of doing what it was supposed to do.

Now, there's nothing earth-shatteringly novel in any of that, but it does suggest to me a different way of reading the parable, a different way of identifying with its characters. What if we were to identify God not with the gardener, but with the fig tree itself? But wait a minute! The story says that the fig tree was not bearing fruit. Do we really want to say that God's work in this world is not effective, does not bear fruit in the lives of those whom God loves? Well, think about it a little more. Why doesn't the fig tree in the story bear fruit? Well, we can infer that it is because the ground is simply much too hard so that the power of the fig tree to blossom and bloom is stunted. The hard ground means that the life-giving moisture and fertilizer just can't get through to do

their work. Are you beginning to see, then, with this shift in identification, who you and I might be in this story? You and I are too often that hard-packed ground!

There is a post going around on Facebook that always hauls me up short. It goes like this: *“Sometimes I would like to ask God why He allows poverty, famine, and injustice in the world, when He could do something about it.... But I am afraid that God would ask me the same question.”* That post has a point! Maybe poverty, famine, and injustice – as well as homelessness and too much violence and too many mean words said by too many people – would indeed be easier to diminish if the ground that God has to work with wasn’t so hard-packed, if you and I and too many others weren’t too hardened and calloused to the needs and pleas of the world. For it does seem, sometimes, that the ground that God has to work with, the soil out of which God’s fig tree might blossom with goodness and beauty, is indeed too hard, too stomped-down by the forces of incivility and meanness and xenophobia and fear and hatred.

So what can you and I do about it? How can we, as the ground that God has to work with, be a better soil for the things that God is trying to do in this world, the blooming of goodness and beauty that God is trying to desperately to make happen? The great 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Teresa of Avila, wrote this:

Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world...

Christ has no body now but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours....<sup>1</sup>  
And she could have equally well written Christ has no ground into which to plant His

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body.shtml](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml)

love, his grace, his goodness except you and me.

So, this morning, as the title of this sermon has it, I invite you to ask yourselves “What’s in your garden?” Is the soil of your life hard-packed with suspicion of those who are “different,” those who don’t seem to look or act like you? Is the ground of your life cracked and dried out so that when God calls you to welcome the stranger and assume the best about others and not the worst, that voice cannot be heard, cannot flourish? Has too much cynicism, too much listening to the shrillest and most hateful voices left you hard-baked in the sun of meanness and incivility? My friends, if any of these are you this morning, know this: God indeed wants to come into the soil of your life so that grace and goodness might bloom, that the good news of unconditional love to all those who are hurting might blossom and be a sign to all those who have been abraded by life, all those who think that God is a bully. So, can you commit this week to maybe putting a shovel into the ground of your life, turning the soil through prayer and even confession – for sometimes, as the story says, you and I do need to have pruned the things that don’t make for life abundant? Can you aerate the soil of your living by asking God to make you less cynical, less fearful? Can you water the ground of your living with regular reading of the scripture, inviting God indeed to blossom and bloom that your life might indeed be a fertile riotously beautiful witness to the amazing grace that has claimed you and made you whole?

Can you do those things? I know I am going to try to do so this week. Will you join me?