

“Do You Have a Green Thumb?”

Luke 13:1-9

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Do you have a green thumb? I'm sure many of you do. I have heard you talk about working in your flower beds or gardens.

I haven't spent enough time doing either to know if I have a knack for it. I had a garden for a couple of years when my children were young, primarily because I wanted to teach them how food is grown.

I made sure I planted several hills of squash and cucumbers. I was told they were easy to grow and produced a big yield.

That was an understatement. They spread everywhere and took over the garden. The kids loved them, not because they liked squash and cucumbers, but they enjoyed seeing those vines growing so fast.

Today's text includes a parable about a gardener who wasn't having as much luck as I had with the squash and cucumbers. It seems there was a fig tree in the vineyard he managed which was not producing fruit. It had been there for three years, which meant it should have been bearing figs by then.

This was a serious problem because fig trees produced lots of revenue. Figs were a staple in the diet of Palestinians, and they ate them fresh, dried or put them in cakes. One fig tree could grow up to thirty-five feet tall and bear figs three times a year.

Periodically, the owner of the vineyard showed up to monitor the growth of the fig trees. He noticed one tree was not producing any figs, so he told the gardener to cut it down.

This was not a hasty decision or unreasonable demand. He had given the fig tree three years to begin producing fruit, which was the customary amount of time needed for a tree to bear fruit. Evidently, he believed it was never going to bear fruit and should not be taking up valuable space in a vineyard.

The vinedresser, however, pleaded for more time to work with it. “Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down” Luke 13:8-9.

I wonder what happened. The story ends without telling us, which makes this parable even more intriguing. Perhaps each of us is to write the conclusion based upon how fruitful our life is.

Why do you think Jesus told this parable? It follows a rather interesting dialogue about sin and suffering. After some Galileans were slaughtered while they were worshipping, Jesus was asked if they deserved this because they were more sinful than the other people in the Temple at the time.

Jesus said they deserved this no more than the eighteen innocent people who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them. Clearly, Jesus did not feel that the victims of Pilate's temper or a natural disaster deserved their fate. They were not being punished for something they had done; they were innocent victims.

Perhaps Jesus followed this discussion with the parable of the fig tree to turn their attention away from others and back to them. He wanted to talk about how they were living, not how and why others died. Evidently, he saw some glaring mistakes they were making, which was leading to their own demise, and he loved them too much to ignore them.

I need to remind you that a fig tree was a symbol for Israel throughout scripture. Furthermore, fig trees fortunate enough to be planted in vineyards received the kind of care and attention that should have yielded lots of fruit. Trees that did not were cut down and not allowed to take up valuable space and nourishment from the soil.

I am confident there were religious leaders in the crowd that day listening to Jesus. They understood this symbolism and his stern message. After all, they heard the same message from John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet and the forerunner of Jesus.

"The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" John preached. (Luke 3:9)

The leaders knew Jesus was talking to them because they were not bearing the fruit God expected to see. Their priorities were out of order. They had forgotten or disobeyed the principles of the covenant their ancestors made with God, and they needed to make changes for their own good and those they were called to serve.

What was missing in their lives? What fruit were they not bearing? It was a long list: compassion; generosity; service; mercy; grace; kindness; unselfishness; patience; discipline; honesty; courage; humility; repentance; forgiveness; integrity; peacemaking.

They lacked sensitivity to others' needs; the pursuit of justice; the responsible use of power; wise and faithful stewardship of influence and resources; a willingness to reach out to all people; and the desire to build bridges of goodwill and understanding to their neighbors, not walls of suspicion and hate.

You see, life was all about them, not the people who needed them. It was about accumulating wealth, feeding their egos, holding on to power and living comfortably. This was because they were addicted to these things.

Many of the religious leaders were not there to serve, but to be served, and Jesus told this parable to indict them. Their tree was barren, at least the way Jesus saw it.

How did they respond to Jesus? They killed him; not then and there. They had to plot, scheme, break rules, disobey commandments, bribe a disciple and hold their noses while making alliances with the Roman officials, but they got it done.

And he forgave them, even while dying on that cross. He never gave up hope that fruit could grow on those barren trees.

For whom are you burdened today? Which family member or friend is not growing in spite of the fact he or she has been planted in a vineyard full of opportunities? Is it a child, grandchild or great-grandchild? Is it a sibling, a school mate or co-worker? Is it your mate?

How many times have you tried to help them? How many times have you walked away and said you are finished trying?

The tension that exists in this parable resides in every heart. The owner of the vineyard wanted to give up on the barren fig tree while the vinedresser pleaded for more time.

You may have the same tug-o-war going on inside your heart. One minute you want to help and the next you are ready to give up. I don't think this is uncommon; it is a universal struggle.

This is why it is important you hear one of the messages in this parable. And what is that? The gospel will not let you give up on those others would discard. It will not do it, at least not without a struggle.

Is this the message you need to hear today? Will you let God help you be like the loving, caring gardener one more time?

On the other hand, who is burdened for you? Whose patience have you just about exhausted? Who continues to shed tears and lose sleep over your behavior? Who sees you wasting potential and heading down the wrong road?

Why won't you listen and respond to them? What do you need from them which would help you bear fruit? Let this parable speak to you this morning, because I think it outlines what you may need.

My friend, Tom Ehrich, says this parable teaches us that all of us need an owner and a gardener in our lives. I agree.

We need someone to hold us accountable and someone to patiently nurture us along our way.

We need someone who will be brutally honest with us and explain the severity of our situation, and someone who will roll up their sleeves and help us find our way out of a mess we are in.

We need someone who will tell us what lies ahead if we do not change, and someone who will help us move in a new direction.

We need someone to remind us of our promises and chart our progress, and someone who will walk with us each step of the way offering words of encouragement and support.

Sometimes that's two different people; at other times it may be the same person. Regardless of whether it is one or more people, listen to what they are telling you with an open heart and mind, because it is coming from their broken and burdened hearts.

What needs to happen for you to respond to those offering you another chance to make changes in your life? Jesus told his listeners to repent. Is this what you need to do?

Do you need to own up to your mistakes and turn from them? Do you need to put down your defenses and listen to others' opinions, advice and encouragement? Do you need a good dose of humility, which always precedes change? Do you need to believe in yourself as much as God and others believe in you? Do you need to care about where you are headed as much as those who care about you?

In the gospel, the call to repentance is always followed by grace and hope. It may be late, but it is never too late.

So, did the fig tree respond to the gardener's tender care and start producing figs? Like I mentioned earlier, I don't know, but I hope so, just as I hope you will.