

Sunday, March 24, 2019  
Rev. Jessica Paulsen  
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Isaiah 55:1-9  
Luke 13:1-9

### God Moves...over the Fence

It's a strange story today, I tell you. A strange story. First, we hear about this incident with Pilate at the temple. Some Galileans were there offering sacrifice and Pilate came in and killed them. Then we hear of eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell. And there seems to be this teaching by Jesus at the end of the stories—don't worry about them—make sure you repent and turn back to God.

If that wasn't strange enough, we then get the parable of the fig tree. Now, I need to be completely honest with you here for a moment—when I was in Sunday School and confirmation and studying the different Gospels, I hated the stories of the fig trees. I didn't understand them. They didn't seem to have a point. And really, who cares about figs anyway? Take that and add it to the already strange stories we've started with in this passage and you can be certain I was convinced this was a strange, strange passage.

I won't say I fully understand the fig trees even now; for our understanding of Scripture is always growing and changing. However, this parable at least, paired with these strange stories of death and repentance, has started to make a little more sense.

So, the stories of people dying end with Jesus calling the people to repentance telling them, “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” You will die. This statement leads into this parable of the fig tree, which is about a fig tree that has not produced any fruit for three years. By anyone's standards this tree would be considered dead. It is wasting space and soil and the owner of the vineyard demands that the gardener cut it down. A fairly reasonable request.

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But the gardener doesn't do what he is told. Instead he argues with the owner, pleads with the owner, "Sir, just give it one more year and I will nurture it and feed it and take care of it." Give it the chance, after its been well cared for, to produce fruit. And if we take that idea back to the people who need to repent, we might hear, "God, give them more time. We'll work with them and nurture them. Jesus will teach them. Just please God, give them the chance, after they have been well cared for, to produce fruit."

One understanding of this passage is to see Jesus as the gardener, just asking for a little more time. And I have to admit, this is where I ended up this past week, when I was looking at this passage. On the idea of Jesus as the gardener, asking that he have more time with the people. And not only more time, but time in which the people would be well cared for, nurtured, given what they need to grow and change so they reach a point of being able to produce fruit. So, WE reach a point of producing fruit.

Because at the end of the day, isn't that what we are called to do? We are called to be the body of Christ in the world, sharing God's grace, peace, love, and care for and with all people—that is the fruit we produce. But in order to produce that fruit, we have to allow God to nurture us, feed us, to till the soil around us, and give us new soil, and that's not necessarily something we're ready to do.

For our roots have gone deep in our old soil. We have our history and our traditions. We have the ways we have always done things. And if those aren't working, well then often churches will double down and commit twice as much effort and energy to what they've done before—they'll send their roots diving deep into that old soil to seek nutrients. Many who work in and study organizations and institutions such as the church, refer to this as institutional maintenance or self-preservation.

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The problem with doing things this way is that more than likely we won't end up producing any fruit. We might keep each other happy (probably not) and we might maintain a place where we can be married and buried, but we wouldn't be sharing God's grace, love, and peace for all people. We wouldn't be helping to bring God's kingdom—a place of equality and justice and welcome for all—into being. Attempting to preserve or maintain the institution—the organization—as we know it is not going to work. We've seen that over the past few decades.

And we have Jesus, here in this passage, if we understand him to be the gardener, saying, “give them more time. Let me dig around them; pitch out the old soil, and bring in new, fresh manure, full of nutrients, so that they might begin to produce fruit.” Now, I want to be clear at this moment—I am not saying throw out everything that's been done before. We don't need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. However, we do need to gain a different understanding of church—an understanding that being the church means existing as a living body, as an organism, not as an organization or institution.

What does that mean? Well, first, it's not as foreign of a concept as it might feel like in this moment. Israel Galindo, a seminary professor, explains, “We regularly teach children that the Church is the people and not the building. And we periodically preach sermons on the theology of the Body of Christ” (*The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics*, The Alban Institute, Herndon, Virginia. 2004. 19). So, we already have this understanding of church as something that lives and grows and changes—much like the fig tree. However, as Galindo goes on to say,

while we may embrace a community of faith metaphor for our shared identity, when it comes to decision making we organize ourselves more like a company with a CEO and board of directors...the reality [is] that a congregation is an organism—despite our best efforts to unwittingly organize the life out of a living thing, or to program the messiness

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out of a very human enterprise...our thinking about being the Church [needs to change] from an institutional organization that we grow and manage, to a relationship system that we need to nurture and develop” (Ibid. 19-20).

The fig tree needed to be cared for, nurtured, and fed. It needed to be treated as something living, as something that needed fresh nutrients and attention. We need to begin treating church the same way. It is something living, that needs fresh nutrients and attention. It is our relationships. And relationships take work. They take commitment and a willingness to be open and honest with one another. Relationships mean we’re not always going to all agree. They mean that church is messy and complicated and challenging.

But they also mean life and love and care. They mean we can be ourselves and know that we are loved exactly as we are—by God and by each other. This is church. Not another organization or civic club we belong to. Not another institution we attend. But people and relationships and all those two words encompass.

This is where I end up from these strange stories today. That we all need to repent and be changed. But also that Jesus is willing to climb our fences, enter the vineyard, and do the work of nurturing and caring for us—so that we might in turn produce fruit—by being the body of Christ in the world.

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