



Growing up in Southern California was wonderful –almost idyllic. Except when it was time for “steer” to be added to the grass and gardens. I don’t know that you can even buy “steer” anymore, or at least probably not in California with all the environmental regulations. Steer – quite frankly – stunk. It was very pungent while being very nutritious for the grass and garden. My father liked to use it once in the spring because everything came up very green and hardy. It made his life as a gardener easier later on the year when the beginning of the season had started off with good nutrients.

Jesus uses a parable of the fig tree today to remind us that we have a limited amount of time to get right with God. The fig tree has had 3 growing seasons without producing any fruit. In a part of the world where arable land is limited, letting an unproductive tree remain unproductive is not good management of time or resources. Thus, the owner says: “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?” Sounds reasonable even today when in this area we have plenty of arable land. Yes, keeping an un-producing tree means we aren’t starting another one that we hope will produce. But, we have plenty of others so it isn’t really that big a deal. Or is it?

The gardener in the parable asks the owner to give him 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.” Don’t give up hope but don’t sit passively by, either. Dig around it. Put manure on it. Do what you can so the tree has the best chance possible to bear fruit and to live. And, recognize that if, with all your best efforts, the fig tree still doesn’t produce fruit, it is time to cut it down – for it to die.

It’s easy – but problematic - to read this parable as an allegory. In an allegory, everything stands for something else. Thus, we might say, well: God is the owner of the vineyard. The fig tree is

Exodus 3: 1-15; 63: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Israel, the chosen people who have refused to listen to God. The gardener is Jesus, pleading for one more chance. And if the fig tree- that is, Israel- refuses to listen to Jesus, then cut them down. Let them die. Shake the dust off of your sandals and walk away. After all, Jesus had a ministry for 3 years preaching and teaching that he was the way, the life, and that those who listened to him would have eternal life- but woe to you if you refuse to listen. God's judgment will come. You will die. Repent, believe and live. Refuse and die.

I've always felt the fig trees in the Bible get the short end of the stick. We have this one that hasn't borne fruit for three years and the owner is willing to just dig it up, throw it on the compost pile and let it die. We don't know why it hasn't borne fruit. Maybe it didn't get enough water or sunlight or maybe the soil in which it was planted was barren. Maybe the reason the fig tree didn't bear had nothing to do with the fig tree itself and everything to do with external factors. We just don't know and that's a lot like life; there is simply a lot of our lives and the lives of others that have factors and influences that we may not know about or we may not understand their relationship to the whole.

It turns out there are lots of references in our Bible to fig trees. One source reminds us that it is the third tree mentioned: the Tree of Life, the Tree of Good and Evil and then clothes for Adam and Eve are sewn from fig leaves. But the story that gets to me is Jesus cursing the fig tree for not bearing fruit when it wasn't the season for bearing figs. Seems very unfair to blame the fig tree when it wasn't even the season for it to have figs.

Jesus asks us to consider how we are like the fig tree. Where have we heard the Word of God and turned aside from it? Where have we been barren when it was within our control to bear fruit? Where might we be letting others define who we are? Where might we benefit from an amendment of soil – an amendment of life? Alternatively, where might we say that we have been fig leaves- giving of ourselves to others to help them grow and learn about God? I'm not talking about standing on a street corner, holding your Bible in one hand, and condemning others who don't agree with your interpretation of Scripture. I'm talking about living a life that models the love of God for us and our call to love our neighbors as ourselves. Where have we helped someone who needed it?

Sometimes we need the stinky manure to enable us to grow deep and strong. The smell wears off in a bit but the necessary work is being done deep down inside if we are open to the Word of God that calls all of us to use our gifts and talents for the Glory of God. To love God. To love neighbor. To go into the world as disciples of Christ. To live a life that makes others say: I want what she or he has.

It is very possible to read this parable simplistically. The fig tree is just a fig tree. The owner is right: when land is scarce, letting an unprofitable tree remain just opens up the rest of the vineyard or orchard to bugs and pests that might actually result in the whole vineyard failing.

We don't know what happens the following year. We aren't told anything more than the owner is requested to give the gardener one more year to see if the fig tree can bear fruit. We don't know if the owner agreed to that request. It might be the owner, looking at the bigger picture, said no – tear it down now. I've already given over three years to this tree. Enough is enough. Dig it up and throw it on the compost heap and let it burn.

Exodus 3: 1-15; 63: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree to drive home that life is uncertain. Death may be capricious. The 18 who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell were not any better or any worse than others- they simply happened to be there when the tower fell. You may not have the chance to repent. And God will judge. Your time to get right with God is slipping away every day. Jesus, as the gardener, pleads with God, the owner of the vineyard, for one more year- one more opportunity to amend your life where you have strayed from the love of God. But Jesus recognizes that there is a point at which the mercy of God is over and the judgment falls. None of us knows when that day will come for us. Our times are in God's hands, not our own. Repent. Turn your life around. Live as if today were the last day of your life because it actually might be.

We pray for the year of the Lord's favor: a year of forgiveness, restoration and second chances. Too often, though, we pray and then we get apathetic. We fail to dig around and put manure on our lives so that our lives can bear better fruit. Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays said of this passage that "Faith is taking your best step and then leaving the rest to God." We need to act and take responsibility for the times and the ways in which we have strayed like lost sheep. Jesus is still our gardener. He wants to dig around our metaphorical tree, to spread manure, and to see us blossom and bear fruit. Won't you let him do this? The results can be spectacular if you will take the chance. Repent. Bear fruit. Trust and believe in the Lord and you will have eternal life.

Amen.