

Luke 13: 6-9 "At Least Another Year" Rev. Janet Chapman 3/24/19

Jesus tells a parable and whenever he does, we are expected to pay attention. "For those who have ears to hear, let them listen – pay attention!" Speak, O God, for your servant is listening. And this is a parable about farming, something Jesus' audience would have known a lot about. It comes after Jesus recalls some tragedies in the news where many people had died due to a political massacre and a natural disaster. Jesus basically says, "Do you think they died because they were worst sinners than you? No, but I tell you, unless you repent, you too will perish." With that, he tells the story of a man who has a fig tree planted in his vineyard. The man comes looking for fruit on it and finds none. He says to the gardener, "See here, for 3 years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still find none. Good farmers know there is more to it than that. This tree is absorbing large amounts of nutrients and nourishment which deprive other trees of vital nutrition. Therefore, cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

It is reminiscent of John the Baptist's call to repentance as the people are baptized in the Jordan River. His words were harsh and unrelenting: "Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Shortly after that, Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized. Soon after that, Jesus began his public ministry and that was three years ago. Three years to produce fruit, three years for people to turn their hearts back to God, but there hasn't been much repentance. Instead of repentance, the resistance to Jesus' vision of the kin-dom has intensified over three years. There isn't any fruit on the tree, so the owner of the vineyard says, "Cut it down!" But that wasn't the end of the parable, was it? That is probably where I would have ended it, since it is clear if we look around today there isn't much repentance going on. "Cut it down!" seems

like the right thing for God to say, especially if we hold true to an image of God as law-giver and judge. Be good, produce fruit, and you won't get cut off at the neck by a God who is always looking over your shoulder, ready to catch you in your lack of fruitfulness. "Cut it down!" But it doesn't happen. The gardener gives the tree a reprieve, "Let it alone for 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."

Barbara Lundblad notes there is urgency and hope in the gardener's voice. "Give me at least a year – I'm not willing to give up on this tree. Let me dig around it, loosen up the hard, clay soil, put some really good fertilizer around it." This is such an earthy story. I knew a man once who got a degree from Fresno State in manure. Seriously. It was a specialization within the AG department that studied which kinds of manure were best for which crops. He was so good at his job, that he could smell a mile away which manure was being used in a field and its overall quality. He taught me way more than I ever wanted to know about poop and I respected him for it. But Jesus' parable isn't primarily a lesson on poop or farming for that fact. Recognizing Jesus as the gardener, we see someone who refuses to give up on those living in the vineyard. Maybe the vineyard is the whole earth or the church or your life or mind and Jesus isn't giving up on any of us. There is hope in this parable – don't cut the tree down. But there is also urgency – give me at least another year. Moving in a direction of promise more than threat, the gardener says, "I'm going to do everything I can to help this tree live and bear fruit. I'm going to find every way possible to get to the hearts that are as hard as packed down soil."

Remember the phrase which set the stage for this parable: “Unless you repent, you will perish.” This parable is about repentance and if we are the tree, then not perishing is going to take some hard work and dedication, lots of digging up and removing those things that have hardened our hearts while nourishing those things that lead to growth. Repentance also apparently has something to do with our previous understandings of God, because this parable turns those old perceptions of a divine law-giving, harsh judge on their head. If we believe that Jesus is a mirror into the character of God, then we get the idea that God is also like the Gardener in our story. But the Gardener is a different character than a God who seeks to punish us for our mistakes. God, as seen through the lens of Jesus, shows compassion desiring to see the tree survive and thrive. So we repent from our misunderstandings of God and learn that God is compassionate, a rich biblical word relating to the Hebrew word for “womb.” As Marcus Borg notes, God is “womb-like,” life-giving, and nourishing, willing her children to be embraced in goodness and unconditional love. We, on the other hand, feel it is quite logical to cut the tree down. We are often more impatient than God. We are tempted to say, “You’ve had your chance. The year has passed and you still haven’t shaped up.” But you and I aren’t God and we aren’t big on second chances. Therefore, it is a good thing our God is all over that. So the Gardener of Grace comes and says, “I’ll do everything I can to bring this tree back to life. Who knows, this just might be the year for figs.” For those have ears to hear, let them listen and pay attention! Thanks be to God!