

Parable Of The Trees

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March 24, 2019

Judges 9:7-15

We are continuing this week during this season before Easter with a story of nature and trees as a jumping off point to reflect about our own lives. today we are going to jump into the book of Judges, from the Old Testament.

To give it just a bit of context, for a period of about 400 years prior to the monarchy of kings, Israel, or certain tribes of Israel, had what were called as “judges.”

It is not a very good term because we understand judges as those who wear black robes and preside over a court within a legal system. However, in the Old Testament, “judges” were military leaders who were not necessarily of a particular blood lineage.

Their role in a broad way was to enact God’s will for the sake of the world. More specifically this meant: protecting Israel from enemies, leadership to ensure life could be lived as God desired, and specifically preserving the pure worship of the one God.

Having said that, as you would have in any nation or tribe, there were good leaders who fulfill their noble role with focus and faithfulness, and there were bad leaders who destroy from their position of power.

The story from Judges we are looking at today is from a dark and violent period of time under the leadership of a handful of bad judges. On the timeline, this was roughly 1145 years before Jesus.

The story includes a parable, which is interesting because we normally think of parables as exclusively from Jesus in the New Testament.

READ JUDGES 9:7-15

This is a gruesome story. Let’s spend just a bit of time understanding the parable and then see how it might provide for us a point of reflection for our own lives.

In this dark season for the people of God, Abimelech, who had denied God’s sovereignty, used money from the coffers of an idol temple to hire a gang of henchmen thugs to kill his 70 brothers in order to be crowned “King” of Shechem.

However, the youngest brother, Jotham, escaped. Jotham then told the people a parable about

trees to challenge Abimelech's action.

Abimelech was Gideon's son. His name literally means "my father is king," but remember this is a season of time when there were no "kings" in Israel, or succession based from blood lines.

The idea is that Abimelech was seeking power, aspiring to a more sovereign position of greater authority, like other nations around Israel. He wanted to be exalted as "king."

His father Gideon had won great victory in battle and the people wanted to crown him king, but he refused. Instead, as one of the less faithful leaders, Gideon instituted idolatry for the Israelites.

Now Abimelech, his son was carrying Gideon's legacy. The whole of chapter 9 is riddled with violence, which had resulted from Gideon's choice to abandon God's ways and all of the good that God might have worked in him. It is clear that things were markedly getting worse under Abimelech's authority.

Two idioms are proven true in this story: "Violence begets violence." and "People who live by the sword will die by the sword."

Gideon, as well as Abimelech, sowed violence and violence was exacted upon them. Violence and destruction came to the Israelites from outside, as well as from the inside between Israelites. It was a mess just about any way you look at it.

This is one of the themes of warning from the book of Judges.

We want to focus more closely on the parable from Jotham, the youngest brother of Abimelech, who escaped the slaughter. He proclaimed a parable about trees to challenge Abimelech's approach to leadership.

In the parable, the trees were looking for a king to rule over them and they go about searching for a suitable tree. First, they ask the olive tree. But of course the olive tree already has an important job of producing oil by which gods and mortals are honored. To rule over the trees would mean sacrificing this very important job and it was not a good tradeoff.

The trees then ask the fig tree to rule over them. Similarly, the fig tree says that it already knows its job and it is very important to produce a sweet fruit that will bless the world. It would be a distraction from this crucial responsibility for the fig tree to rule over the trees.

So, they went to the grapevine asking it to rule over them. Again, the grapevine said that it was very clear about its job which was to produce grapes that were made into wine. Wine was so important in bringing joy to gods and mortals, and it couldn't possibly neglect this job to take a position of leadership among the trees.

Finally, the trees went to the bramble. What is a bramble? It is a spiky, prickly, unruly vine or bush that ensnares all that come close. This is a plant that certainly cannot rule in good faith because of its nature to entangle. The only possible result is disaster, because the bramble also has a particular way of being and it is not suited for leadership.

The response of the bramble to the invitation is one of coercion, manipulation, and deception. It invites the people to come under its shade (which would certainly ensnare them) and a threat of being devoured by fire if they do not.

If you saw the question on the bulletin, perhaps you see where I am going here. This parable highlights the good, useful, and helpful roles of the olive tree, the fig tree, and the grapevine. Each had a productive role to bring goodness to the world beyond themselves.

We can take this as a prompt to consider the role that God has given to each of us that makes good sense related to our experience, our giftedness, and talents.

The reality underneath is that when we are doing what God has called us to do it is life-giving not only for others but for us as well. Everyone wins!

The Apostle Paul wrote about this in his first letter to the church in Corinth when he referred to the many gifts given to people. He said that all of them were given by God to build up the body of Christ in the world.

What gift do you contribute to others that if you could not give it, your life would feel empty.

This is the core expression of your spiritual life at its best.

This is a twist on a tried and true interview question that Barbara Walters asked Katherine Hepburn many years ago. It can go in a lot of different directions and there is no wrong answer.

What kind of tree might represent your spiritual life at its best?

This is your spiritual life at its best, so perhaps you know that you are not fully living up to it, but you get a sense of the direction. This question gets at how you hope to express your spiritual life as you grow.

I'll get you started with several thoughts. Remember, your own interpretation of what a tree represents is most important, so you can pick one of the trees I mention, but for altogether different reasons.

1. Could your spiritual life at its best be described as an **Olive Tree** that honors others, encourages them and builds them up?

2. Could your spiritual life at its best be described as a **Fig Tree** (or some other fruit tree) that provides a fertile space for others to enjoy the richness of the life with which God has blessed them?

3. Could the best expression of your spiritual life be summed up like a **Grapevine** that cheers people up who are feeling low and depressed?

4. Perhaps your spiritual gift is like an ancient wise **Oak Tree** that offers wise counsel and insightful knowledge for others to study under your branches.

5. Here's another one. What about the **Weeping Willow**? Many suggest staying away from using the Weeping Willow in interviews because it implies sadness and depression. However, maybe your gift is holding your branches out as safe, protected space around people, like a weeping willow, for them to fully express their emotional burdens and find the space to heal and be well.

6. Maybe you are an **Evergreen**, alive 365 days of the year with the ability to bend without breaking. You offer contagious enthusiasm even through difficult times and provide the energy to propel teams of people into wonderfully productive action.

What tree would you choose to represent your spiritual life at its best?

I encourage all of you to choose a tree and the reason that it represents your spiritual life at its best. Then find a partner and share with each other what you came up with.

Perhaps in this reflective process you will discover some new edges for how you might offer your unique gift to the world.