

March 11, 2007

Luke 13:1-9

Sermon: "God's Timing Is Not Always Ours" Rev. Bob Jack

Text: *"For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree..."*

I'm a lousy gardener; let me admit that up front. If I want something to bloom and grow in my yard, I have to let Carol take care of it. The only tree I've had any success with is a red bud I planted a few years ago too close to the drainage spout, so it gets plenty of water, and it's grown like crazy. But Carol hates that tree, so I guess there's no justice!

In Jesus' parable about the fig tree, the owner of the vineyard comes looking one day for some fruit. In fact, for three years he's been looking for fruit from this same tree, and found none. It seems that fig trees bear fruit every year, ordinarily, so this tree must be hopelessly barren.

"Cut it down!" the owner yells, in frustration.

Maybe you remember other places where the Bible talks about vineyards? Isaiah the prophet observes (5:7): *"For the vineyard of the Lord...is the house of Israel, and the people of*

Judah are his pleasant planting...” Israel is God’s vineyard. Things don’t always go well in God’s garden. The prophet Joel reports that in the unfaithful Israel of his day, *“The vine withers, the fig tree droops”* (1:12).

Later, when Jesus told another story about a man who had a vineyard, leased it out, came to collect his share of the fruit, and then was treated shamefully by the tenants, that the scribes and the chief priests suddenly realized he was telling the story on them – that he *“told this parable against them”* (Luke 20:19ff).

God’s people – Israel, the Church – is the vineyard. The owner of the vineyard, God, has come to collect. But there is no fruit. Now, the keepers of the vineyard “got some ‘splainin’” to do. The keepers of the vineyard, the scribes and Pharisees and chief priest, the pastors and educators and elders and Sunday school teachers, are going to have to give an explanation why, after all these years, there’s been no fruit to speak of.

It’s a story about a vineyard and the owner’s anger at his fruitless trees and those who keep them. It’s a parable about the

leadership of Israel and the leadership of the Church. Jesus rails against leaders in the church who are fruitless in the work they offer up to God. Plenty of time has passed, Jesus seems to say, and these fruitless leaders have failed to act. The Lord of the vineyard has been patient for a long time. Now, after waiting three years longer than he should have, he says in desperation, “*Cut it down!*”
Cut it down.

In Isaiah, the owner of the vineyard gets so upset with his unfruitful vines that he says, “I tell you what I’m going to do with my vineyard. Remove its hedge, break down its wall, trample it down, make it waste, refuse to prune or hoe it until it is overgrown with briars and thorns. I’ll command the clouds not to rain on it, that’s what I’ll do.”

The owner of the vineyard has been coming around for years, looking for some figs – Advent, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost – no figs. Cut it down!

Fred and Joy Fregerio, our missionaries in Kenya, have told me of the severe conditions in which some of the pastors carry on

their work in that country. They get persecuted by the government, persecuted by the Muslims, persecuted by roving bands of murderous thugs. It's often tough just being a pastor in Kenya.

I remember talking, once, with an African pastor who was visiting the States, and whose working conditions were similar to those that the Fregerios talked about. He was curious about my work as a pastor in this country, so he asked me, "How many baptisms have you done this past year?"

"Baptisms? Oh, I guess maybe six."

"Six!" he said in utter amazement. "Only six?"

"Well, we're a relatively small church," I said somewhat defensively.

"Six! And you kept on preaching, even with that little response?"

"Well, how many baptisms did you do last year?" I asked him.

"Well, at first only a couple of hundred. But then, when the persecution started, we were doing forty or fifty every month. Bob,

I will tell my friends back in Africa, ‘I met a brother in America who has remained faithful, and kept preaching, with only six baptisms to show for it! That’s wonderful!’

(Presbyterian Church in 1900, 75% of baptisms were adult)

And on the day when the owner of the vineyard came looking for figs, there were none, and he said, “Cut it down!”

Cut it down.

“Master,” the servant begged, “let it be. Leave it alone, and I’ll dig around it, throw some manure on it. Give it more time, then you can cut it down. Dung ought to help. Fertilize it with dung – a little manure.”

By the way, the New Testament Greek word for dung/manure is *koprion*. It’s really not the word you’d use in polite company; not your usual church word. But Jesus uses it. This is the only place it is used in the whole New Testament. And ordinarily, I wouldn’t use it as part of a sermon, except that Jesus used it first. If I had been the author of this parable I might have said something

like, “Master, let me throw a little fresh soil around its roots; maybe a little more water, and we’ll prune it back some.”

Nope!” Jesus said, “Spread a little manure on it; that’s what’s going to help it grow. Manure.”

Not polite, church terms. But it’s been three years. Time for a drastic change. Time to get earthy.

This tree ought to get cut down. The master is perfectly justified in recommending that course of action. And yet, because of the special pleading of his servant, there’s still time for the fig tree. There’s still time. Spread a little fertilizer on it and give it a little more time.

What is Jesus saying? What is this parable about? Well, there’s mercy here – a second chance. Grace. Not the polished, dignified, formal-sounding, “O Lord, have mercy on us” kind of church talk about grace. It’s the “spread-a-little-manure-on-it” cow-stable kind of mercy.

What do you do for Christians who just don’t seem to get it? How about a church that exhibits no life at all in its worship, and is

content to substitute the dry husks of morality for the electric joy of the Holy Spirit? What do you do for church leaders who are more interested in keeping house, in keeping the bureaucratic machinery oiled, in crunching the numbers, than in producing fruit? What do you do for all of these?

Spread a little manure on them, Jesus says. It may help.

The church is only going to rise to the level of our expectations. Sermons seem boring, liturgy dull, prayers unengaging? Well, guess what? It's not the gospel that's uninspiring. It's not God that suddenly became uninteresting.

There's still time. And maybe if you spread a little bit of . . . mercy . . . you'll begin bearing fruit. Because of the servant's pleading, there's still time for the fig tree to blossom and grow and be fruitful.

How many times I've counseled with couple who have come in to my office saying that the love has gone, that they want to call it quits, to "cut it down." What they often mean is, "We're unhappy." Or, "It's gotten tough." They're miserable and they

don't know what to do about their misery except to quit. The sad thing is, they're often right on the verge of a painful, but necessary breakthrough – a rebirth. By quitting and splitting they're going to forfeit any chance of growing up and becoming really interesting human beings, whose marriage really can work. That's when I need the courage to say to them, "Put a little manure on it, folks. Stay in there. Give it more time."

One of the Bible commentaries says that in this parable we're really listening in on a debate between *justified judgment* ("Cut it down!") and *miraculous mercy* (Put some dung around it and give it time). Another Bible scholar says this parable is a debate within the very mind of God – sort of a "God against God" deal – a debate between a God who gives us what we deserve (Cut it down!) and a God who offers us what we don't deserve (Give it more time!). Mercy and judgment personified; given voices in this story of the fig tree. One is perfectly justified in angrily saying, "Cut it down!" and the other is amazingly forbearing in pleading, "Let it alone; give it some time."

We hear this same debate going on in the book of the prophet Hosea. God cries out, *“I will pour out my wrath [on you] like water”* (5:10). Then again, later, God asks, *“How can I give you up[?] . . . My compassion grows warm and tender”* (11:8).

Friends, what we are doing here is listening in on a struggle deep, deep within the very heart of God. It is the same struggle that Abraham knew when he bargained with God for the sake of Sodom and its inhabitants. It’s the same struggle that Moses experienced when he pleaded with God not to destroy the people of Israel when they disobeyed. It’s a struggle deep within God that betrays both his strong arm of justice and his great heart of love for us. God says, *“Repent! Turn now, before it’s too late”* . . . but also, *“Give it time – there’s still time; I love you.”*

You and I see this dynamic again in Matthew’s Gospel, in two more parables that Jesus tells. The first is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Do you remember it? The owner hires people to work for him all throughout the day. And those he hires last – the folks who didn’t begin working until maybe an hour

before quitting time – he pays them the same as the folks who have labored all day long in the blistering sun. What is Jesus saying? There’s still time! Even if you come late to the vineyard, there’s still time.

Then there’s the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Remember it? They meant to get oil for their lamps, but first there was one thing, and then another, and before they knew it, the wedding had begun. The door was shut, and they were shut out. Sorry, out of time. It’s over. Too late!

Both of these stories are in the same gospel.

So, how does our story end? Does the fig tree bear fruit? How effective was the manure? We aren’t told. Jesus leaves it open-ended. Did a miracle occur? Did the dung do it? In other parables, Jesus tells us how they end, but not in this one. All we know is that, for the time being, the fig tree is still there. There’s still time.

Remember how it felt when the surgeon came back in the room with a big smile on her face to tell you the operation was a

success? “You’re going to die one day,” she said, “but not today – not of heart disease. Not on my watch. You’ve got time.” Remember how that felt?

Or, how ‘bout that certain professor you lived in fear of all semester, but who sat you down one day and said, “Look, I know it’s been a tough grind for you. Don’t worry about the deadline. Just do your best, take your time, and finish the paper. You’ve got time.” Remember that?

Or, the accountant that found that extra bit of refund on your tax return that bought you some time in paying off those nasty overdue bills. How did that feel? Like you got more time? Remember?

One of my neighbors is from Austria. His father worked all his life for a baron, as the head groundskeeper for the baron’s huge estate. Johann has such a green thumb, there isn’t anything he cannot grow. Needless to say, whenever he comes to visit his son, I get him to consult with me on my yard. The only problem is that

Johann speaks very little English and my German is spotty at best. If his son isn't there we have a slight problem in communicating.

One day, Johann was showing me pictures of the estate where he worked, beautiful pictures full of flowering trees and colorful gardens. And there was this huge stand of geraniums that were so red (even in the picture) that it took my breath away. So, I mustered my best German, and said, "*Wie rot diese Blumen sind!*" How red those flowers are! How do you get them so *rot*, so red, I asked. What are you using for fertilizer?

"*Blut*," he said. *Blut*. Blood. He had a friend who worked at the slaughter house who would bring him a bucket of blood each week. The flowers grow best in blood.

You know, in the New Testament, the word for "let it alone" – as when Jesus has the servant say, "Master, let it alone; I'll put manure on it, and dig it; let it alone" – that word in Greek is the same word for forgiveness.

Jesus came preaching, "The hour is come. Repent! Change your ways! Believe!" And we crucified him. He came looking for

fruitfulness, and instead he found barrenness. Hard-hearted, dried-up, sterile twigs instead of fertile fruit trees. He came looking for fruit, saying, *“I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.”* And we nailed him to the cross, then went back to business as usual. We turned our backs to him, scorned him, and scourged him, and left him to die. And from the cross he cried, *“Father, forgive them – let them alone. Give them time.”*

And his blood dripped down, as fertilizer for our faith; penetrating deep into our roots, so that we might bear fruit, have time to bear fruit.

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul,
O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this
That caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul,
for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.*

