

A Prayer for the Fig Tree

Life is full of questions. Why does an executioner rub alcohol on the arm of a person about to have a lethal injection? Why do they call the time of the day when traffic moves the slowest “rush hour”? And why is freight moved by a boat called “cargo”, while freight moved on wheels “shipment”? Sometimes there do not seem to be good answers to some of life’s most difficult questions. People struggle with the question of why do bad things happen to good people? How can a good God permit suffering? Why are some chosen when others are not?

When I entered Junior High, I was still a pudgy child and not very athletic. One of the most agonizing experiences of seventh grade was the humiliation of standing in line as two athletically gifted captains would choose teams for kickball, softball, basketball, etc. and watch as nearly everyone else was chosen while I remained one of non-chosen. No matter how hard I tried, I was still a pudgy geek failing to make even the top twenty draft picks in a gym class of twenty-one. I was an outsider looking in. Then something happened that summer between the seventh and eighth grade. The testosterone kicked in, muscles replaced the flab, agility replaced ineptness, skills developed easily and my plodding gave way to real speed. After my first home run blast I quickly jumped in the draft picks. A few more good plays and I was at the top of the list, no more waiting in line. Those gut-wrenching feelings of being left unwanted were replaced by feelings of superiority and cockiness toward those geeks standing in line where I used to be. I was no longer the outsider looking in but the insider looking out. I moved from being the unchosen to the chosen. It seemed so important then and such an accomplishment.

The problem is that it can easily distort your worldview. It distorts the way we see ourselves just as it distorts how we value the lives of others, but more than anything it distorts our understanding of God. Jesus is addressing that distortion in our worldview and giving us another way of seeing things in our Gospel for today. More about that in a moment, but first let us pray

Let’s look at the first several verses of our Gospel text for today. “Now there were some present at the time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Just when you thought you were an insider looking out, celebrating the fact that you are not like those poor folks, Jesus forces us to rethink our position. Theologian and writer, R.C. Sproul wrote, “In effect what Jesus was saying was this: “You people are asking the wrong question. You should be asking me, ‘Why didn’t that tower fall on MY head?’” Instead of asking why do bad things happen to good people, we should be asking why do good things happened to bad people – like me? Suffering is no respecter of persons, at one time everyone will suffer—the good,

the bad, the ugly. It is our freedom to choose, the choices we have made that brought the consequences of sin and brokenness into the world. The question is not, "What did I do to deserve this," but the question should be, "How can God help me live with the consequences of sin that have engulfed my life?" The question is not "Why did God do this to me?" But the question is, "How can I let God come calm the troubled waters of my life?" Instead of blaming God for the brokenness of the world, our action should be to turn to him in prayer, in repentance, in hope and in faithfulness. Instead of building a wall between us and God in the time of brokenness, we should be tearing down the wall that separates us from God so that we can let his caring, loving concern for us penetrate our entire lives. Instead of blaming God, we should fall on our knees and ask God to walk with us, to strengthen, us, to build us up, to give us the courage to continue in His mercy and His power. This repentance is essential for His life to flow through us and without His life in us we perish.

Jesus makes his first point in this Gospel reading by looking at current events and then he tells them a parable. Look at your Bibles again. Luke 13: 6+ "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

The owner of the tree made a reasonable request. He wanted to see and enjoy the fruit the tree was designed to produce. Instead of fruit all he received was a redundant report, this tree had no fruit. After three years the owner offers a regretful recommendation, "Cut it down!" This is what sin does to us. It makes us unfruitful. Have you ever felt unfruitful in your life? In the last seven months I have listened closely to all the criticism. I would have to be a stone not to take it to heart. I want you to know there is probably some truth to every criticism. No one is more aware of my sinful nature than I am. I have been arrogant, rude, vindictive, defensive, self-righteous and mean-spirited. I have used my speech to attack instead of instruct, condemned instead of cooperated, manipulated instead of managed. I have been uncaring, unkind and unloving. There are many times when I will argue anything just to be right instead of listening just to learn. I am sure that if we went around the congregation you could add to the list. (No, don't start raising your hands.) I have broken every commandment in thought, word and deed. The worst that could be said about me has already been spoken, I am a worthless sinner deserving death and I have already accepted that verdict on my life. So whatever else you may contribute is not worse than that and I have listened to it all and read all the responses on the survey. For all my sin I ask for your forgiveness, but more than anything I am depending on the gardener.

Let me be clear, that does not mean I have changed my position on the issues we have been discussing. It does not mean I have changed my position on what I believe the scriptures teach. I have understood more clearly than at any other time in my ministry what Paul was describing in Romans chapter 7 – "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... I have the desire

to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-this I keep on doing... So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Even when we try to do the greatest good we can sin is never far behind.

Let's return to the parable. The fig tree is standing tall, growing, filled with leaves. It looks good, but it simply has no fruit. You know that means for your life. We are religious but not necessarily faithful. We are nice but not obedient. We spend time with Jesus as long as he only expects us to show up once or twice a month. We proclaim our faith among other Christians but not among our friends, neighbors or co-workers. We are more concerned about appearing good than growing spiritually. We would rather follow ourselves than follow Jesus. The owner comes looking for fruit and finds none.

The problem with this tree was that it was not only fruitless but it also was making the ground useless. It was taking out the nutrients from the soil. It was absorbing all the precious resources from the earth and giving back nothing. Unfruitfulness robs the whole Christian community of the resources it needs to provide a powerful witness to the world. They are looking for transformed lives and transformed homes and transformed employees and employers, transformed students and teachers, transformed friends and neighborhoods. Without the fruit others will get a false impression of God, His Word and His people. They can easily conclude that it is all powerless and unproductive. Where is the hope? Look at verse 8.

"Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it.'" Jesus is clearly the gardener. He speaks up for the fig tree. In effect he is saying to the owner, don't look at this tree's past. Don't look at the three unfruitful years. Don't look at the many failings and fallings. Don't look at those three years but look at its future. Give it one more year.

I'm glad today that God is willing to look beyond my past mistakes, look beyond those times I rejected Him and neglected Him, look past those times when I was fruitless and faithless. I'm glad that He is willing to give us a new start. Last year you may not have been all God wanted you to be. You may not have been all you wanted yourself to be. There's no use beating yourself up about it. Confess it and move on into your future.

The gracious gardener, Jesus says to the owner that He would provide this unfruitful tree with special attention. The way the world works is that we invest time and energy in those who are successful. No one buys stocks in companies that they see losing money. People don't want to hang around losers. People don't pay to see losing teams. This gardener said he would invest time and energy in this fruitless tree. That sounds like Jesus to me. He doesn't give up on us

when we mess up but He comes down and works with us. He labors long with us. He cries with us over the pieces of our brokenness. Jesus came down to earth and made friends with those rejected by society, the prostitutes and the pimps, the tax collectors and the thieves. Jesus invests special attention in unfruitful trees.

Now look at the text. It says that he would dig around it and fertilize it. Now back in those days, one had to take their hands and get the dung and put it into the hole made around the roots. This gardener is saying I'm willing to get involved in the messy stuff of life to save this tree, even when it is difficult and dirty. That is the Gospel we proclaim, Jesus is willing to get himself dirty to save us. He entered the mess we created and works through it to make us what he wants us to be. Jesus can use even use bad situations, trials and tribulations, heartaches and pain, persecution and opposition, to make us into what we ought to be. That is precisely what he did on the cross to save us.

There is another point I want to make about this parable, something you need to know about the gardener or vinedresser. In those days they were paid from the fruits of the vineyards and orchards. When the harvest came in, a portion of the produce was their salary for tending the vines and trees. His livelihood depended on the fruitfulness of the trees.

I'm glad today that God is still willing to get down and dirty to save unfruitful trees like you and me. Notice he begs the owner to give this unfruitful tree another chance. By doing this he is in effect linking his future, his salary, his livelihood with the fruitfulness of this tree. He was taking a risk on this tree. If you looked at this tree's past there was nothing but failure. But he cares for this tree so much that he is willing to risk his future for it.

God could have banished us to utter darkness and despair because of our sin. He could have closed the book on this miserable planet a long time ago. When you look at our history even the good ones are bad; Noah, a drunkard, Abraham, a liar, Jacob, a deceiver, David, an adulterer and a murderer, Samson, a fornicator, Peter, a deserter. When you bring it closer to home, you fill in the blank with your own personal story. God could have given up a long time ago, but Jesus came called disciples and formed His Church to make disciples of all nations. He linked His future with our future, connected Himself with fallen humanity, made himself one of us, pitched His tent in the midst of our tents, risk the mission of his church on imperfect disciples, took on risk on you with all your faults and took a risk on me with all my failings.

I would be remiss if I didn't also point out that sin is serious stuff. We can resist the loving effort of the gracious gardener. But eventually the owner is going to return and look for the fruit. If there is no change the day will come when mercy will have to agree with justice that enough is enough. Isaiah 5:4 reminds us that one day God will ask the question "What more could have been done more in my vineyard that I haven't done to it?" I sent my one and only Son to feed you, tend you, grow you and die for your sins. I sent His Spirit to plead and agonize and suffer with you. What more could I have done to make you fruitful? If that won't nothing will!

Let me take a moment to connect some of the most important words of the Lord's Prayer to this parable. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe." The Kingdom of God is the place where God is King and where the King moves and rules there is power at work. Luther reminds us that when we pray this prayer we are asking for God's power to overtake us. Even the word for Lord in Latin is "dominus." We want God to have dominion over us, to dominate us, to control us. If the fig tree is not ready for that, it has no hope.

We live in a world where there are all kinds of dominions that we must fight against in order to remain free. Those forces want to grip us externally, but Jesus wants to hold us internally. He wants to loosen the hardness of our lives and wants to fertilize us with his life, his love, his spirit, so it sinks into our roots and pulses through every cell of our being. Jesus wants to hold on to our hearts. He wants to grasp our heart with faith and hope so we can produce the fruits of love. We are praying as unproductive fig trees, "make me captive Lord, then I shall be free." (I think that is a verse of a hymn.)

In a world where we are encouraged to do it our way and not depend on anyone, and ask for directions from no one and believe that somehow that really makes us free, we would really rather pray, hallowed by my name, my kingdom come, my will be done! Yet in the Lord's Prayer, we pray, Thy will be done on earth as in heaven. Luther also reminds us that God's will is going to be done, but we pray that His will, will be done by us. That is the only hope for the fig tree. In the explanation in the Large Catechism, Luther writes that God's will is accomplished through the cross. God's will is accomplished by hindering and defeating the devil, the world and our sinful self. God's will is accomplished by strengthening us so that we are able to stand firm in His Word. We can't consider the will of God or the Cross of Christ and pretend that sin doesn't matter or that sin is overcome by human wisdom or cheap grace. To move in those directions is to banish the tree to a fruitless end.

When you get to the end of the parable don't you want to have Paul Harvey give you the rest of the story? Whatever happened to the tree? I can tell you. We are the answer, your life and mine, for we are the trees and Jesus is the Gardener. Opening ourselves to all the Good Gardener has to give is the only prayer for the fig tree and for us, but I leave you with that absolute assurance that His Grace is sufficient, His cross more than enough, His salvation all that we need.

In the name of Jesus,

A-men

A number of years ago a Lutheran pastor working with a deeply superstitious group of people in a small community in the Caribbean islands, had great difficulty reaching the people. The church building had only a few people present on Sunday mornings. There were more animals that roamed in and out of the sanctuary than people as the building had no doors.

The first person that came to faith in Jesus was the local drunk. Joe gave his life to Jesus, stopped drinking but because people had little respect for Joe because of his past, they paid little attention to Joe's new found interest in Christian faith. Joe tried to think of ways that he could witness to his neighbors.

He asked the pastor to come to his home and bless it. He would invite neighbors and friends to participate in the event and the pastor could talk about Jesus and Joe would tell them the difference Jesus had made in his life. The pastor came and about 30 people gathered from the community to participate in the event that included refreshments. Joe's home was a rather small, rundown shack. But the blessing was a wonderful event. The next week several of his closest neighbors showed up for worship.

Two weeks later, the pastor noticed a commotion in the streets and saw smoke and flames billowing up from the vicinity of Joe's home. Joe had given up drinking but not smoking. He had fallen asleep and a cigarette but had ignited a fire that completely destroyed his home. Miraculously Joe escaped the blaze. Immediately his friends began ridiculing his faith in Jesus. You have your home blessed and then it is destroyed. Joe listened to all their comments without saying a word. The pastor finally made it down through the crowd to Joe's home. When he arrived, Joe fell at the feet of his pastor with the whole town watching, praising Jesus and thanking the pastor for blessing his home. Joe said, had you not blessed my home, I would never have made it out of the fire alive.

The next Sunday the sanctuary was full and day after day the pastor blessed home after home in the town, until almost every villager had received a similar blessing. Even if the worst would happen, God would save their lives.