

Luke 13:1-9
2/28/16—Lent 3C

Psalm 63:1-8
Isaiah 55:1-9

Gifts of the Gardener

Have you ever been to a vineyard? Have you ever spent time in a vineyard, marveling at the greens and golds and purples of the vines under a blue, blue sky? Vineyards are often planted on rolling hillsides in regions with cool nights and warm days. Dreaming in sunlight, a vineyard is a place of stillness. A place of beauty. A place of peace. I think that modern-day vineyards look very much like vineyards must have looked thousands of years ago. The Bible gives us more than a few word-pictures of vineyards, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

And most of these vineyard songs and stories are rich with meaning that lies beneath the surface, beneath the literal sense of the words. The Bible is God's word, which flows from the thoughts of God. And, as we've heard in the prophecy of Isaiah, God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. So, to understand this word—to draw out its meaning—we need to do some digging around in it. Just like the gardener in Jesus' parable that the church reads this Sunday.

Jesus tells this parable to a first-century agricultural community. He offers his listeners familiar images. A vineyard. And in the vineyard, a fig tree.

Now many of you know what a fig tree looks like. They grow here in South Carolina. Maybe you've tasted the sweetness of their fruit.

But the thing is, this fig tree in the vineyard—it's produced no figs. It's borne no fruit.

You know, this fruitless tree makes us think of a sermon we heard about bearing fruit. A sermon delivered by that fiery preacher, John the Baptizer. A sermon we heard not too long ago, right here in Luke's Gospel. John preached about bearing fruit. Bearing fruit as evidence of genuine repentance. According to John, repentance has to come before it's possible to bear fruit.

And that must be true. Because right before Jesus talks about this fig tree bearing fruit, he calls his listeners to repentance. Jesus has just learned of some villagers from Galilee, visiting Jerusalem, who died when Pilate—yes, *that* Pilate—sent his soldiers to randomly and brutally eliminate Jews worshiping in the temple. Jesus has already heard the fate of some city-dwellers who were killed when a fortified tower collapsed on them. Innocent people have died violent deaths.

But in Jesus' day, and even long before that, many believed that suffering and calamity are God's punishment for sin. You remember the ancient story of Job. Job's so-called "friends"

contended that his suffering could have been caused only by his own wrongdoing.

And this way of thinking has persisted into our own time.

Maybe you've had the experience of picking up the daily paper or turning on the morning news and hearing that it's happened again. Yet another young person has been killed with a deadly weapon. Or died in a car wreck. Yet another family weeps. Tragically—senselessly—yet another life has been cut short.

Maybe later that same day, you hear snatches of conversation about this same news report. At the doctor's office, at the grocery store, even at a gathering of friends. You're not surprised to hear these comments. You've heard them before. They go something like this:

You know, he must have gotten in with the wrong crowd.

Or—I just can't help wondering: what was he doing in that neighborhood anyway?

Or—What was she doing out so late? Nothing good ever happens at that time of night.

When bad things happen, it's the nature of us human creatures to try to comprehend the incomprehensible. To try to order the chaos of this spinning world. We long to feel that we have some measure

of control. And often, the easiest way to get that feeling is to blame the victim.

Isn't that how it is with those who bring Jesus news of the latest atrocity? They're speculating: *What did those Galileans do to deserve such a fate? They must have done something terrible!*

But Jesus says *No! These victims of brutality and accident were not worse sinners than anyone else.* Evil and aggression, disaster and catastrophe are not from God. For everything God has created is good.

But be aware, Jesus' teaching suggests, that life is fragile. Death can come suddenly, without warning. So take care that you're not so focused on other people's sins that you're oblivious to your own. For if you don't recognize and acknowledge your own sin, you can't turn away from it and turn toward God. It's this turning, this repentance, that's essential. In the words of the prophet, seek God while you can find God. While there's still time. Because you don't know how much time there is.

It's like this, says Jesus. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit and found none. And so this vineyard owner sends for his gardener, saying: Look here! All these years I've been waiting. And still no fruit. I am so done with this tree. Take the axe to it!

That's the first word we hear. A word of judgment. But *cut it down!* is by no means the *last* word.

Because the Gardener has another idea. The Gardener cares for the tree. The Gardener wants more time for the tree. So the Gardener can cultivate the tree.

By now, you've probably figured out that the tree is you. And the tree is me. The Gardener digs around in the soil in which you and I are planted. In these weeks of Lent, when you pray, when you fast, when you read or hear God's holy Word, when you engage in self-examination, the Gardener is cultivating that in you which is most basic, enriching even the very deepest roots.

And in order for the Gardener to do this work, he asks the Vineyard Owner to give the tree more time. The Gardener intercedes for the tree. That's why, when you and I pray, we pray in his name. For he lives to make intercession for us. And that's exactly what we see him doing here through the lens of Luke's Gospel. *Let it alone*, he pleads. Let it alone.

My sisters and brothers, this Greek word for *let it alone* is the very same word that means *forgive*. When the Gardener begs the Vineyard Owner to let the tree alone, he's really asking, *forgive it*. Forgive this tree. Give it more time! Give it all of your holy seasons.

Give it an autumn to shed all the colorful but lifeless vestiges of its past. Give it a winter to be refreshed by your cooling rain, to be nourished and strengthened in your good soil. Give it a springtime to grow, to reach out with tender green shoots, to blossom and bloom. And give it a summer to flourish and thrive in the sunshine of your steadfast love and to bear the fruit you desire from it. Lord, give this tree a time of your grace, a time of your forgiveness for its sin and its fruitlessness.

The Vineyard Owner has patience with us trees who've been too stubborn, too self-centered, too hard-hearted to bear fruit. The Vineyard Owner gives the grace-filled gift of time. We've been given this marvelous gift of time, between the Incarnation and the promised return, to make everything right. To turn. To *re*-turn. To repent. For only then can we bear fruit. We've been given this blessed gift of time: this kingdom season of restoration and forbearance and forgiveness. We've been given this time of another chance.

The time given to us may be long. It may be short. Its duration isn't ours to know. What you and I are called to do is to live each day as a gift of divine grace. To live each day of our lives in faithfulness. To make each day one of repentance and renewal. To make each day one of growing in the Word. To make each day one

of opening ourselves as the Gardener works on us and in us, making it possible for us to bear fruit for the Vineyard Owner. For that's the purpose for which we've been planted in the vineyard! Our charge is to live in such a way that we can—without fear—give an account of how we lived out this metaphorical year of the Lord's favor. This gift of time between the times.

Beloved, maybe that's why this parable of the fig tree is open-ended. Justice or mercy? Promise or threat? One voice commands: *Cut it down!* Another voice keeps urging: *Forgive it.* In the parable, we're not told what finally happens to the fig tree. That's because the story's ending depends on your response and mine.

But as Taylor Burton-Edwards points out, the Gardener “understands that we may be more apt to produce fruit with good tilling...than merely by the threat of the axe's edge.”

The Gardener has tilled the soil. He's asked for more time for the tree. He's given the tree the special care it needs. And the Gardener has one final gift for the tree. The Gardener does the vital work of fertilization with the gift of himself. The Gardener lets himself be lifted up and he lets his own rich, red blood drip down, trickle down, flow down on and into and around the tree. Nourishing the tree. Giving life to the tree. Saving the tree that is you.

For the Gardener loves you with an unconditional love. The Gardener longs to cultivate your spirit until you become the person you've been created to be and until you bear the good fruit you've been created to bear. The Gardener who knows you intimately knows that—like Isaiah's penniless ones who are invited to receive—you are utterly unable to pay for all that *you've* received.

Yet the Gardener continues to nurture you and to care for you just as though you were the only tree in the vineyard. There's no charge. It's the gift of the Gardener.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.