

The Slow Work of Godⁱ - Luke 13:6-9

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I

Jesus was a storyteller, more specifically he told parables. “A parable is a story that requires the imaginative participation of the listener. They are brief teachings that Jesus created, as he was talking with people. The word parable literally means “something thrown down alongside of.”ⁱⁱ Jesus’ parables are meant to be heard alongside of our lives. They are meant to make us ponder, use our imaginations, and ask questions. How might this parable from Luke live alongside us? What questions does it cause us to ask?

Hear now one of Jesus’ parables from Luke 13:6-9. You’ll find it on page 71 of the New Testament in the pew bibles.

Then (Jesus) told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He (the gardener) replied, ‘Sir, 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.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God....

Let’s begin our imaginings with the owner of the vineyard - who might he be? Do we blame him for wanting to chop down an unfruitful tree? In our world of efficiency and production, where time equals money, an unfruitful tree is cut down. That is the mark of a good business person, someone we might admire. Or, perhaps this owner may simply be tired of waiting on an unfruitful tree. Maybe I planted it in the wrong place, so I’ll just cut it down and start over. I think we can imagine ourselves as an efficient and sometimes impatient landowner.

Or, could the owner be God who is ready to prune the orchard and eliminate the unproductive trees? Could this be the judgment of God, ready to cut loses after three years? If we imagine God as a harsh and demanding judge, we may think “Cut it down” comes from God. But I wonder – would that harsh command “cut it down, why should it be wasting the soil” come from God?

Next, let’s look at the gardener, or vinedresser – who might that be? This man advises restraint and patience. He wants time to do what good gardeners do – create the conditions so that their trees or vines or flowers thrive. “Give me one more year. Let me dig around it, put manure on it, tend it well and wait. If you have figs next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Does this gardener represent an advocate pleading with God for more time, another chance to get an unproductive life in order? Or is the gardener, God, asking for more time from the owner to do his work of nurturing – fertilizing, digging, watering and waiting? Is God staying the hand of our impatience, putting off the owner’s desire toward production and proof of worth? Is this God’s way with us?

And then, there is the unproductive tree caught in the middle. Who might that be? The tree is caught between the owner and the gardener’s competing convictions: “Cut it down” on one hand, and “Let it alone” on the other hand. And, as Jesus tells the parable, “let it alone,” the word of grace wins out. “Let me do what I can to nurture and coddle it, to dig around it, work in some manure, and wait for a year to see if it bears fruit.”

Could not that tree be you or me or any of God’s children? And doesn’t added time ring like forgiveness in our ears? Take note - in the parable forgiveness is not a magic “poof” to make the tree suddenly productive. Rather, forgiveness is committing to some slow work, to providing nurture, protection and time. It is as if God is saying – I’m not holding your lack of fruit against you. I forgive you. I’m willing to let forgiveness be your nurture. I want forgiveness to be your way forward and let’s see what difference it makes. I want forgiveness to be your hope.

The parable doesn’t tell us how it turned out for the fig tree. We rarely see outcomes in Jesus’ parables, for the purpose of a parable is to set us thinking and pondering. How is God like the gardener? How are we like the fig tree? And what might this forgiveness do for us?

II

Let’s ponder some more. If God is the gardener, the one willing to say, “Let me have a little more time to do my work,” it seems that God is committed to us for the long haul. This story gives a face to the way scripture speaks of God, who “is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” God’s character is to choose the slow work of manure, of cultivation, of forgiveness. It is not glamorous and showy work and it will take a long time. God is willing to walk with us in our lifelong journey of growing into the image of God planted within each of us. God is willing to do the slow work of forgiving us, of staying in relationship with us, so that day by day, we may grow in love, kindness and mercy.

So how does this gift of forgiveness work on us – how does it feel? Does forgiveness have the power to change us? My first remembered experience of forgiveness comes from when I was in elementary school, in fourth grade, and I found in one of the junk drawers in our house a mechanical pencil. I thought it was just about the coolest thing ever. You could write and write and never lose the point. I could use this all day at school without ever needing to go to the pencil sharpener. It wasn’t at all like the cheap, plastic mechanical pencils

I use now. It was heavier with pretty wood grain on it. I took it to my dad and asked, "Whose is this, and can I use it?" He told me it was his. He had carried it with him during the war to write up his reports, but he didn't use it anymore, and I could certainly use it – just don't lose it. Well, you can imagine how this story turns out. I carried it back and forth to school for several weeks. All my friends admired it, especially the boys, but one day when I got home and started my homework, it was gone. I put my coat back on and walked back to school, looking everywhere. I walked back home looking again, hoping to find it, but it was gone. I'd done exactly the thing my dad asked me not to do. I'd lost his special pencil. That night when he came home from work, I met him at the door crying and saying, "I lost your pencil, I've looked everywhere and I can't find it. I'm so sorry." Then he picked me up and I buried my face in his shoulder and I heard him say, "It's ok, it's just a pencil. I forgive you." The anger and the disappointment I had expected, never came, and I was so relieved. A month or so later he even gave me another chance. It was my birthday and one of my presents from him was a new mechanical pencil. All these years later, the gift of his forgiveness is still working on me, still making me grateful, still providing me with a model of one who is slow to anger and quick to forgive, and still teaching me that our relationship was more important than my mistakes.

Although this is an early childhood experience, and I did become a teenager with plenty more opportunities to need forgiveness, it does have all the components of a true experience of forgiveness - remorse, confession, apology, the giving and receiving of forgiveness, and a restored relationship. For me it is a primer for how forgiveness can work, and how it feels. Yet, we all know life can get much harder than a lost mechanical pencil. People do and say painful and destructive things to one another. Childhoods can be horribly scarred, marriages can fail, families can splinter and never regain their footing; communities and nations can be pulled apart by angry disagreements. Violence comes in word and deed sparking cries of revenge, and peace seems like a far off dream. We ask, will it ever end? And we pray, is it even possible to forgive?

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he taught them three things we need to ask of God each day – our daily bread, help in the fight against temptation and evil, and forgiveness. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." This receiving and giving of forgiveness is to be our practice, our way of life. And when difficult sins come against us, how often are we to forgive? Not seven times, but seventy times seven. Surely some things done to us will need that and more; sometimes it takes years to come around to the truth that only forgiveness will set us free from the anger, resentment and bitterness we harbor against those who have hurt us. Yet, forgiveness doesn't mean the abused must return to the abuser. Rather, forgiveness is like a slow walk with God toward freedom – freedom from anger, bitterness, hurt and fear.

III

According to Luke, shortly after Jesus told the parable of the fig tree he and his disciples entered Jerusalem for Passover. By the end of that week Jesus was crucified. In a sermon by Eugene Peterson on this parable, he points out that there are strong parallels between the parable of the fig tree and Jesus' crucifixion.ⁱⁱⁱ The impatient owner who desired to "cut down" the unproductive fig tree, is similar to the leaders who plotted to get rid of Jesus by having him arrested and crucified. "Cut it down", and "crucify him" share an impatience and a judgment of unworthiness. And, the gardener's reaction "Let it alone" and Jesus' prayer from the cross, "Forgive them" are actually the same Greek word. This word can mean "let it alone, hands off, cool it, or forgive." It is the same word we hear when Jesus said, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Just as the loving gardener stayed the hand of the impatient owner, Jesus from the cross, asks for the same thing, "Father, forgive them." But Jesus goes a step further by saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."^{iv} This is forgiveness lavished upon us, even before we have any idea forgiveness is what we need. This forgiveness has no preconditions – Jesus isn't asking for an apology, not even the intention to do better – Jesus simply intercedes on our behalf. Jesus from the cross simply forgives, he gives grace, amazing grace.

I read recently about a woman who was in counseling to try to understand and move beyond a violence done against her. The time frame was shortly after the tragic mass shooting of Amish school children by a member of that community, when the parents of the fallen children had cooked meals and gone to visit the parents of the young man who did this horrific deed, and the grieving parents had offered their forgiveness. The woman in counseling was stunned. She asked her counselor, "How could they do that?" The counselor wisely replied, "Their faith calls them to walk toward forgiveness."^v

My friends, this walk toward forgiveness is the slow, saving work of God. May we trust this slow work, no matter how long it takes, and walk with God toward forgiveness – which is freedom - from anger, bitterness, hurt and fear.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ The title of the sermon comes from a poem written by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Trust in the Slow Work of God*.

ⁱⁱ Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2017), p. 249.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peterson, p. 254.

^{iv} Luke 23:34.

^v I believe this story came from a book entitled, *The Forgiveness Project*, by Marina Cantacuzino, but with apologies, I cannot find the quote!