

"Let It Alone"

Luke 13:6-9

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Since this will be my last Ecumenical Lenten service before I retire, I would like to preach on a text and a subject I have never addressed in my almost 46 years of ministry - the text you have already heard - The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree in Luke 13:6-9 and the subject you might have already guessed is that word that Bess Truman took 35 years of convincing Harry to say - manure. Speaking of that subject....

A little girl saw this farmer who was
transporting a load of manure.
She asks him what he was going to go
with all that cow poop.
The farmer tells the girl,
"I'm taking it home to put it on my strawberries."
The girl looks up at the farmer sitting
on his tractor and says,
"I don't know where you come from,
but from where I come from
we put cream and sugar on our strawberries."

I tell that story to remind us that Jesus told stories
In fact, he was a great storyteller.
All four gospel accounts present Jesus as a storyteller.
The stories he told were called parables.
They are brief but memorable stories
that Jesus more or less told as he was talking
with people on the road.
The word parable literally means
"something thrown down alongside of."
Our response to many such parables is like
encountering a pile of manure on a country walk,
"What is this thing doing here, right in front of me?"
It makes you want to stop and change direction.
Parables make us question, think, connect, and imagine.

Most of us have a favorite Jesus parable.

What's yours?

Any takers for the manure story?

Let's hear it again to better familiarize ourselves.

Read From Bible

Chapter 13, from which this parable is situated,
stands at the midpoint of the central section
of Luke's Gospel that begins with Jesus
in chapter nine, verse 51 which reads:

"When the days drew near for him to be
taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

Jesus tells this parable to his disciples
while they are on their way from their
home country in Galilee to Jerusalem
for the Passover feast.

The way they take passes through Samaria
Jews are not welcomed there.

For over six hundred years there has been
bad blood between Jews and Samaritans.

The first day after crossing the border
into Samaria, Jesus and his disciples
seek a place to stay for the night.

The Samaritans let them know in no
uncertain terms that they are not welcome.

The "thunder brothers" James and John
are outraged and want to kill them on the spot
by calling down supernatural fire.

For them this is almost a knee-jerk response.

This is the same Samaritan territory where
the great prophet Elijah, several hundred
years before, had called down fire from heaven
to incinerate King Ahaziah's henchmen.

But Jesus is not Elijah.

Jesus rebukes the 'Bonerges' brothers!

In Jesus's parable the violent impatience
of the owner's command to "cut it down"
matches the outrage of James and John
when confronted with the rude Samaritan inhospitality.

And the gardener's response, "Sir, let it alone
for one more year, until I dig around it
and put manure on it." sounds more like
a response Jesus himself might make.

For some time Jesus has been preparing his followers
not to have any illusions that people would
receive either him or them with open arms.

Twice before setting out on the journey through
Samaria to Jerusalem, Jesus told his disciples
what they were to expect.

In the days to come, he would be rejected
and killed (9:22, 44).

And, next week, holy week, we will hear
again the opposition and hostility that
greeted Jesus when he arrived in Jerusalem
for the final Passover.

For me the parables of Jesus are the best windows
for getting us to see who he is and what he is doing.

If the eyes are the window into one's soul,
the parables allow Jesus to reveal to us
the true character and nature of
the one he calls "Abba."

God had cultivated Israel to be a fruitful
tree in God's vineyard.

Even the prophets of old made this connection.

Joel told God's people, "you are my vines" (1:7).

Isaiah reminded them, "The vineyard of the
LORD of hosts is the house of Israel" (5:7).

Thus God had every expectation of them
to bear good fruit.

Also, they had every spiritual advantage:

The Word of God, the promises of the covenant,
and God's history of saving activity.

Now they even have the presence of the Messiah.

Therefore, they should repent and bear
the abundant fruit of obedience to God.

The 35 verses of Luke's thirteenth chapter
contains six unique sections that
begin and end with Israel's need
to repent or face future judgment.

Luke commences chapter thirteen with
references to two current events that
reverberate like today's terroristic acts –
the massacre of Galileans by Pilate
and the collapse of the Siloam tower upon
eighteen innocent victims.

Jesus exploits the powerful sentiments associated
with these tragedies to warn the living
and call them to repentance.

In calling for such a turnaround, Jesus echoes
and fulfills the Baptist's familiar call
for "fruit in keeping with repentance."

Like the younger brother in a later Lukan parable,
Israel needs to make an abrupt course change,
an about-face to receive the promised
reconciliation of God.

So Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree.

The prophets of old often used the fig tree
as a symbol of judgment.

The fig functions similarly in this parable.

Three times Jesus speaks of its ^{barrenness} fruitfulness.

The owner wants the tree to be cut down
and replaced with one more promising.

In response to the command, "cut it down,"
the gardener intercedes as an advocate,
"Sir let it alone for one more year,
until I dig around it and put manure on it."

The word "manure" stops us in our tracks.

In a quiet voice, Jesus (the gardener?)
basically implores, "Hold on – Wait. Have
patience. Give me some more time."

Let me put some manure on this tree.

Manure. God is not in a hurry.

How many times have we heard the caution

of a psalmist or a prophet saying "Wait for the Lord"?

Someone once said of today's culture,

"The greatest temptation of our time is
impatience in its full original meaning,
the refusal to wait, undergo, suffer."

Manure is not a quick fix.

It has no immediate result, except for smell.

It is going to take a growing season and

maybe more to see if it makes any difference.

Manure by our consensus is refuse, garbage, waste.

We pay to have it collected and hauled away
out of sight and smell.

But the observant wise know that this

apparently dead and despised refuse
is teeming with numerous nutrients
and microorganisms needed for life.

Come to think of it, it's the biological stuff
of regeneration and resurrection.

A few days after the manure story had entered

into the imagination of those who heard it,

Jesus entered Jerusalem and before the week was over,
he would be hanging on a Golgotha cross.

Pilate and Caiaphas would form an unholy alliance
and agree that Jesus had to be cut down.

He was a threat to the precarious peace that

Pilate's Roman army was deployed to preserve.

He was a threat to the highly profitable festival

business that Caiaphas and his Sadducean minions
were running out of the Jerusalem temple.

Jesus was "wasting the soil," using up their space.

And so they had him cut down.

Beloved people of God.

Jesus' first word from the cross was a plea

to the owner of the vineyard, Israel:

"Father, forgive them" (23:24).

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There's a connection here to the manure story.
The owner's order, "Cut it down;" is echoed
 in the Holy Week cry, "Crucify him!"
And Jesus' prayer to the Father, "Forgive them"
 is an echo of the gardener's pleas, "Leave it alone."
Here the context of the parable and prayer converge.
For those of us who are up to our necks in manure,
 which is to say, up to our necks in forgiveness,
 it is perhaps important to note that the forgiveness
 Jesus prayed for us is not preceded by any
 confession or acknowledgment of wrong doing
 by the crucifixion crowd – or by any of us since.
Preemptive forgiveness, pre-applied manure!
Jesus prays that we be forgiven before any of us
 have any idea we even need it, "for they know
 not what they do."
No preconditions, just amazing grace. Amen