

SERMON FOR LENT 3, YEAR C

Parable of Grace (Based on Luke 13:6-9)

Bible scholars categorize the teaching stories of Jesus in three categories: Parables of Kingdom, Parables of Judgment and Parables of Grace. We have before us this morning, a parable of grace, the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree.

A parable is a little story with a big meaning. In mathematics, think of a parabola which is a U-shaped curve that is mirror-symmetrical. Using that same root, a parable mirrors God's nature to us. Jesus taught using these stories. The fact that we are still studying them, still

moved by them, tells us Jesus was a master storyteller and teacher.

Today a barren fig tree stands pathetically before us as a symbol of judgment, crisis; it is a time to make a decision about this sorry tree due to its failure to produce.

But this barren fig tree also reveals to us the unique way in which judgment is for now, at least, suspended in favor of grace. Perfectly justifiable, correct and reasonable judgment on this bad situation gives way to a hopeful letting be, a reprieve.

We have a fig tree before us this morning, a fig tree planted in a vineyard.

Can you picture it? The owner of the tree is principally a grape grower. A fig tree does not belong in a vineyard. The owner planted this tree in his vineyard for his personal delight. Vineyards are for producing grapes not figs, so this tree is here not out of his occupation, but for his pleasure. He likes figs.

In his reflective story, Jesus leads us to draw some conclusions. We can take a literal approach to the story and say that God is the owner of the vineyard, Jesus is the vinedresser and we are the fig tree.

Imagine that God is the owner of the vineyard, which is an image of God all throughout the Bible. Jesus is saying that the world is more God's hobby than God's business, that it exists more for

pleasure than for profit. God's attitude toward the world, therefore, involves favor from the start. Grace is not something God drags in later on just to patch up messes. Unnecessary, spontaneous delight is the very root of God's relationship with the vineyard, the world.

But there is a wrinkle in our Lord's story. No, not the part about seeking figs and finding none. Jesus introduces the vinedresser into the story. He is not the owner of the vineyard, he is not the one who wanted a fig tree in the midst of the grapes. He is a Christ figure in the parable. Underling though he is, he invites the owner of the vineyard into forbearance and forgiveness so that the

barren fig tree continues to live by grace. Remember, even on the cross, in the very teeth of death, Jesus himself says, “Father, forgive.”

Get this, the vinedresser says to his superior, “If it does not bear fruit next year, then you will cut it down.” I’m not sure what that says about the owner of the vineyard who I interpret as God the Father, but I am certain what it says about God the Son, the vinedresser, the one who offers the reconciled creation to the Father and to whom the Father has, in fact, committed all judgment. It is he who will never go back on the promise he has pronounced over the world when he told us, “I did not come to

judge the world, but to save the world.”
(John 12:47)

The world lives, you live, as the fig tree lives, under forgiveness. The world, of course, thinks otherwise. In its blind wisdom, the world thinks it lives by merit and reward. The world likes to imagine that salvation is essentially a pat on the back from a God who either thinks we are good eggs or, if God knows how rotten we actually are, considers our repentance sufficient to make up for our unsuitability.

But by the foolishness of God, that is not how it works. By the folly of the cross, Jesus becomes sin for us. He works in the vineyard for us. He comes to us as

the Vinedresser. He does not come to check up on us to see if we have produced good fruit. He does not come to see if we are good. He does not come to see if we are sorry. He knows our repentance is not worth the hot air we put into it. He does not come to count anything. He comes only to forgive. For free. For nothing. On no basis, because like the fig tree, we are too far gone to have a basis. On no conditions, because he saves us for free, by grace unconditionally. We do nothing and we deserve nothing. It is all, absolutely and without qualification, one huge, hilarious gift.

All because there is the Vinedresser.
That is why we love him, the

Vinedresser, Jesus. We don't know about the owner of this vineyard, who is God the Father. The only conclusion we can surely draw about God the Father through this parable is that he's lucky to have such a lovable Son.

The Vinedresser, we can love him. He saves us from death. The Vinedresser, we can be thankful for him. He gives us another year and keeps us from being uprooted, cut down, eliminated.

He does everything, we do nothing. We just trust him. It is a nifty arrangement for deadbeats like us and it is the only arrangement that can possibly work for us.

As long as you are in him, you bear fruit.
As long as his death feeds your roots,
you will never be cut down.

It is a parable of grace. Without the
vinedresser, we all will be uprooted and
pitched into the burn pile. But because
of him, we have life.