

Sermon / 23 March 2025 / Luke 13:1-9 / OK. And then.....What's Next?

My friends, I offer to you now “The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree” from the Gospel of Luke.

*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?” The gardener replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’*

*Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was.....*

Hey! Wait! What happened next? You can't just leave us hanging here and move on to a story about a crippled woman. What happened to the fig tree?

I mean, thanks for the parable, Jesus, but could you finish it? Would you please tell us what happened next?

What's the point? What are we supposed to learn from that parable?

Did the landowner agree with the gardener's suggestion and give the tree another year to live or did he cut it down immediately anyway?

Did the fig tree survive and did the gardener follow through and take good care of the tree with digging and manure? Or was the gardener lazy and left tree to its own devices?

And if it all went as planned, what happened after that year? Did the fig tree bear fruit? Or was it still fruitless? And if so, did the gardener ask for another year of reprieve or was the tree cut down as promised?

What happened, Jesus? What was the outcome? We're invested in this story. You promised a parable...a lesson. And all we've got now are questions.

What happened next? How does the story end?

And that, my friends, is the confounding problem we face as Christians. We are called by God, by Jesus, to spread the Good News. To preach the Gospel. To feed the hungry. To clothe the naked. To welcome the stranger. To love our neighbors as ourselves.

We do our best to live as Jesus teaches us to live. We strive to bring the kingdom of God here to earth. But we seldom get to see what happens next. We rarely see the outcome of our efforts.

And that's a problem for us, isn't it? As humans, we want quantifiable results. We want to make sure our efforts are worth the trouble. We want the satisfaction of knowing we did a good job.

Or at least we want to know what didn't work and how to change in the future to assure Christian success.

So why don't you finish the story, Jesus. What happens to the fig tree? What happens next?

You can read commentaries and find explanations of this parable of the barren fig tree all over the place. Most all of them tell us that God is landowner, Jesus is the gardener, and we are the fig tree. God wants us to bear fruit. If we don't, then apparently, it's curtains for us.

I have a problem with this basic premise, but OK we'll go with it.

Jesus then comes to save us. To help us bear the fruit. But it seems there's a time limit. We've got to get our act together and bear some fruit or, once again, we're done for?

That all seems really harsh. And, frankly, not all that helpful to us Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because, my friends, we are here to hear the word of God. We're here to learn and then follow the teachings of Jesus. We are here to bear fruit and share it with the world. We've got the basics.

We are called to help other fig trees grow, bear fruit, and flourish. That's what we're doing here. That's the bringing of the Kingdom of God here to earth that I keep talking about. And as a deacon, it's my responsibility to help all of us accomplish this task.

But what happens next? Is it working? Are we doing it right? We need a performance review. How're we doing?

Many of you help with Church Unbound on Sunday afternoon. Meeting our neighbors on the street for fellowship, worship, and food. You greet people, you talk with them, you do what you can to help them...and then perhaps you never see them again. What happened next? Did they find a warm place to stay? Did they reunite with their family? Did they conquer their addiction?

We tend the fig tree and but happens next?

Last year a new family attended St. Mark's. I greeted them. I met with them – had coffee. We exchanged some meaningful emails. I really related to them. Then I didn't see them for a few of weeks. I've reached out a couple of times over the past month. No response.

I thought I was doing a good job with the fig tree and now I have no idea what happens next.

Many of us are not happy about the direction our country is headed. We write letters. We protest. We attend meetings. We speak out against unjust policies. We help those impacted by strange new proclamations.

We manifest the kind of world we want and what we believe to be a fair and equitable society for everyone. As Christians who follow the teaching of Jesus, we do our best to build God's kingdom of love, acceptance, forgiveness, and grace for all here on earth.

But we aren't seeing immediate results. We toil, we dig, we spread fertilizer, and we don't see much – if any – fruit from all our work.

What happens next?

Unfortunately, what happens next is that we often get upset, angry, furious that our vision – our work – isn't changing anything – isn't helping right away.

We get tired. We get grumpy. We fear our work is worthless. Worse, we lash out at the other gardeners who are also doing their best to help the fig trees. And even

though we're discouraged, we think our way is the only way. If they don't tend the fruit trees the way I, do it, then they're doing it wrong.

And when we don't see results – when we don't know what happens next – we give up.

My friends. We cannot give up. We cannot stop trying to make this world a better place. We must never quit building the kingdom of God here on earth. Jesus sacrificed his life to save us from the depths of sin and despair. Jesus didn't give up on us. We cannot give up. We cannot stop spreading the Good News of love, acceptance, grace, and forgiveness he brought to us.

In his poem "East Coker" from "Four Quartets" T.S. Eliot wrote, "For us, there is only the trying."

That is what we must do. That is all God asks of us – to try....and to keep trying. It can be daunting. It can be exhausting. We want to know that we're getting results. But it's a long game. We are all part of God's plan and we may not know what happens next. But we have to keep going and we must keep trying.

We work to change the world – to bring God's love, God's way, God's kingdom to the mess that we see around us.

So, what's next?

Get up every morning and say a prayer asking for God's help and guidance.

And what's next after that?

With God's help, greet your neighbors with true love and affection.

OK, what's next after that?

Remember your baptismal promises. With God's help, continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.

Persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.

Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

Yes! What's next after that?

With God's help we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as ourselves.

With God's help we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

All right! And what's next after that?

We will come together – often – to get strength and encouragement from one another. With God's help we will never attack or disrespect those who are working toward the same goal as us.

We will rest and renew when we need to so that we can come back and tend those fig trees with the strength and knowledge that God is with us.

What's next?

We don't know. For us there is only the trying.

We keep trying. We keep on keepin' on.

Queer writer Dan Savage recently shared these thoughts: “During the darkest days of the AIDS crisis, we buried our friends in the morning, we protested in the afternoon, and we danced all night. The dance kept us in the fight because it was the dance we were fighting for. It didn't look like we were going to win then and we did. It doesn't feel like we're going to win now but we could. Keep fighting, keep dancing.”

Keep trying. Keep dancing. We don't know what's next. But Jesus calls us to continue our work.

That's what's next. Being ready for what's next.