

## One More Year

Menno Mennonite Church

June 25, 2023

**Purpose:** to examine the possibility of other ways of having the scripture read us.

**Message:** God's gift of patience is a sustaining presence for our hope and our promise.

**Scripture:** Luke 13:1-9 [I will read]; Psalm 69: 7-10; 16-18 (Please read/have read)

**Synopsis:** The work of being people of faith is often thought of undertaking change. It is what we expect of ourselves, of our church and of God. It is what we understand God demanding of us. We need to be productive, and if we are not, then God will act accordingly. The words of John the Baptist and many others threatening pruning and fire are buried deep and ring loudly for us.

Yet the parables invite us to creativity. They remain useful to us because they have great depth of meaning and implications. Here we have the opportunity to think about the parable with a different view. What if the role God occupies in the story is not the one that we readily assign—the impatient landowner—but that of the gardener invoking greater nurture and growth? What if we are the landowner demanding productivity and output? How does that change us, move us, and free us to greater hope as God works patiently with us?

Luke 13:1-9

**13** At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

<sup>2</sup> He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” <sup>3</sup>

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

<sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

<sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable:

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

<sup>7</sup> 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?’

<sup>8</sup> He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

<sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Now and again, I know that I owe our music leaders a profound apology. Not only do they faithfully offer their talents to lead us all in singing—no small thing and an on going gift. Thanks go to you all—always. But the apology comes in when you get to come along and try to set the themes of the day to music. Sometimes that is easy enough. You really can't do Easter without at least one rendition of *Up from the Grave he Arose* and the other classics. Speaking on creation, love and connection has a fairly good repertoire to be selected from the Hymnal. The apology comes on days like today, though. You are not likely to find Luke 13:1-9 anywhere in the indexes of the our songs. Fig trees might appear a few times and passing references. You are going to struggle to find a musical summary of the promise of judgement least you repent. Basically, we are stuck from time to time with what the scripture says and how we live it into our lives and our faith and that is not a terribly tuneful place to be. So apologies may be in order.

Which merits the question of, well, why then pick this of all texts for our engagement this Sunday. There is no fast rule that says we have to engage in everything out there, after all. Why not just do what we often do and just leave well enough alone, moving on to something far happier? A fair question. The gospels are wide after all, and the whole tradition wider still. We know that these comments are out there, but that doesn't we have to embrace them per se. Connecting it to the comments about the inclination to connect the happenings of life to the judgement on those it happens to, and it is a bit of a mess of a saying, and certainly belonging to the container that we keep on the shelf labeled "hard saying of Jesus: approach with caution."

Yet, there is some realistic stuff here. First of all: it is Jesus—it is a parable. I don't think it wise to unduly avoid what Jesus has to say no matter what is being said. There is something there in the telling, and parables can so often be a fount of wisdom even if we are not particularly looking for it. Further, it does ring a little bit true, doesn't it? I am guessing we haven't spent a lot of time in landlord-tenant relationships, but we do no a thing or two about production and accomplishment. Production in all its terms is part of our life, and being productive on the timeline that we deem appropriate can be a deep and abiding fear for many. We need to produce no matter what our vocation: crops in their time, lesson plans as they come due, the ongoing demands of the various deadlines that define our calendars. I think we can all relate to the struggle to produce, the struggle to met expectations, most notably our own. I know that I often feel that way when I compare to-do with yet to do, wondering if there is any hope whatsoever. What ever our realm we know what it is to feel the powerlessness and frustration of not feeling

like you are producing, or it just won't come. To some degree or another we are all fig trees in some ways.

We cast the characters well even if we don't know the situation well. We place Jesus where we know Jesus to be: the one interceding, granting grace, offering pardon and reprieve. And almost invariably we know our selves to be the fig trees, holding on by the roots, likely getting it wrong. Likely at risk of destruction. Of course we place God in the place of judgement and caprice, demanding the reward for the investment that he has made. God is the one in the parable who must be most capricious, demanding and angry because that is how we understand God. In the parables, God is always the one with power—the king, the land owner, the investor. Not that this is particularly wrong—when you are met with the omnipotent and incomprehensible God of heaven and earth who will in time judge the living and dead, where else are you going to place God? This casting isn't particularly good or bad—it just is. It is how we think of the world. It is how we think of God.

But it doesn't have to be the only way. One of the great gifts we are given by the teacher in the parables is that they serve us so well. Every time we go back and look, we can turn our heads, squint our eyes, and see things, perhaps a little differently. Because stories can be read in so many ways and the figurative can point in several directions at once we are given a remarkably flexible platform that can teach us many different things. We assume that God is the one that impatiently judges the fruitfulness of our spiritual labors because that is how we often judge ourselves. But it doesn't need to be.

After all, does this character who come demanding productivity and profit sound like the God that we have had revealed to us? The God of the Christ who comes to liberate all who would labor in bondage, what ever shape that might happen to take? The God who comes and decides to be with us, beside us, and redeem us from the destruction that is of our own making? The God who will leave the 99 well behaved to find the one that has wondered off? To me the casting doesn't ring true. It is worth saying that were you to look into the maturation of fig trees, fruiting begins between year 3 to 5. So the expectation of wasting your time at year 3 as a land owner is already a little bit cheeky. The one that is demanding, judgmental, and a little bit out of touch with how things are and how things really work sounds, really, a whole lot like me, and like the humanity I know too well. We grow impatient when the things of our lives that *should* be we organized and easily handled somehow goes off the rails and fails to meet our expectations.

95 percent of the time I don't give my physicality a second thought. But where I get massively impatient with it all, most infamously with myself is when the stuff that I know how to do fails to translate into the stuff that I am able to achieve with my own 2 hands, or at least not to my full satisfaction. Then I get frustrated—the kindest way to put it—and demand all the more of myself for the failing. I am guessing we all have our areas and means where we do the same.

Because here is the thing: what if the parable is speaking not about us and our spiritual productivity but to the patience of God? Maybe it isn't one more year until the inevitable judgement but one more year to see what God is bringing into being in us, through us, and around us? When we shift the roles just that single position across and place ourselves not as the objective fig tree, but in the demanding producer and God as the gardener whose work still is not complete, there is a lot more to learn of what we are being taught here. Think of 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter chapter 3 “...with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:8-9) God is so patient with us, beloved. The patience of a thousand days. God has all the time in the world to accompany us into who we are becoming, even if we at times struggle to imagine that change is fully possible.

Simon Peter was just minding his business mending his fishing nets when Jesus walks by and says follow me how could he have ever known who he would become? On the day before he was walking the road to Damascus, Saul did not know he would become the promoter of Christianity and not the persecutor of it. The day before the hemorrhaging woman reached for the hem of Jesus cloak and was healed of what must have felt to her like thousands of years of suffering she did not know it would end. When we find ourselves in the place of wondering whether what we are doing is providing the fruit that God wants, or being convinced yet again that God isn't really all that pleased with us after all, we are given the invitation of all invitations: give it a minute; and see what a little bit of tending of the divine can deliver.

Is this to day that we resign ourselves to ourselves because it simply is out of our hands and rests with God? Of course not. We must always be willing to turn away from that which holds us fast, binds us tight and holds us captive. God's grace is sufficient for all that we need, but that grace also convicts us to try again, to change what we can, to be willing to change. The

working of grace is one of patience, yes, but it is also one of conviction and confrontation that brings about change where it is best needed. As tempting as it is to think that our spiritual selves are best achieved through our own efforts and our own ability to reach perfection, we know that this is simply beyond us. We must, ultimately, be changed in, by and for grace and that means embracing change. I just don't think that the God who invites us to change does so with a limited time offer, a glance at the celestial watch and a schedule to keep.

But what it does mean that even that which seems most closed off and immutable in our lives remains open to the Spirit of change. Another year, another month, another day, more time for the God who changes all to continue to work in us and through us. Another opportunity to be surprised by the changes that God has in store for us. Another year to find perhaps even that which we have given up on—the relationship that has long been broken, the hurt that just goes so deep, the preoccupation that we wish were not ours, none of that, none of all the stuff that we wish would simply not be in our lives is ever fully and finally foreclosed upon. For God's patience can move even where we least expect it to move. New growth can come from the most barren of soils, if God wills it to be, and we are willing to be changed by that will.

Try as we might to have grace make sense to us and our way of thinking, I suspect it never will. There is just so much distance between the world as it is and the world as it was meant to be. But God's patience remains long after ours has run dry

One more year for us to discover all that God can do in us. Can we ask for more? How can we not be amazed? May this be our grace and our promise. Amen,