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Mar 23, 2025

*Luke 13:1-9*

*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?*

As spring finally begins to arrive, the gardeners amongst us start thinking about the growing season. Some people take the scientific approach, perfectly measuring and preparing soil amendments, starting the right plants for the right conditions, watering meticulously. Others who are plant artists just know...and it usually turns out great anyway. Regardless of what type of gardener you are, ultimately you're doing the same thing...following each plant's very well-established scientific blueprint. Think about growing indoor plants hydroponically...if we control every imaginable variable...perfectly regulate the nutrient mix, pH, light exposure and temperature, we tend to see incredibly predictable results.

I might still have all of seminary to get through, but I think I can pretty safely state that the Bible isn't really here for gardening advice. Jesus called his disciples to become fishers of people, making it pretty clear that what we're talking about here is actively sharing the good news, helping to bring people closer to the kingdom of God.

And people, unfortunately, are not fig trees.

While we might think we can predict all of the conditions for successful growth, and a thriving existence, sometimes we're so, so wrong, and we have no idea why. And then what?

I think about a student who was perhaps the most well-matched student to her rural Vermont high school I could imagine. Exuberant, athletic, socially involved, mostly studious. Singer of the National Anthem at basketball games from 6th grade through senior year, Mountain League first team soccer player, All-State music festival performer since 9th grade. She lived and breathed school spirit, even if the reason wasn't abundantly clear. If you had to ask me what this kid's faith was in 9th grade, I'd probably say Danville High School. She was at least the third generation of her family to attend the school, and a very amazing family it was. This is the type of family whose Thanksgiving table runs at least 18 people and one beagle deep, and despite maintaining such a large and connected presence, manages to rise above small town drama and negativity again and again. The type of parents who combined both fiercely

advocating for their kids, and encouraging independence and accountability like it was their job. Student Council and National Honor Society president, class representative to anything that needed representation. When the pandemic hit, she and her mother put their sewing skills to work, both for the good of the community, and as a small business, providing custom face masks for real estate clients, sports teams, and the school's graduating classes. As the need for masks subsided, the home business branched out into pillowcases, hair scrunchies, and various other post-pandemic products...cord wraps, chapstick holders, more masks eventually.

All of the elements for growth were right here, so readily present, and yet, this is the student who returned from the COVID shutdown struggling to keep her GPA above a 2, failing every single class, and watching the homework pile up endlessly. Just when things started to get better, being a teenager during the pandemic made it much worse again. Being amongst the first on her team to test positive for COVID, ultimately causing a forfeit the morning of basketball semifinals, after navigating a season of endless cancellations and restrictions underscored the huge letdown that the pandemic era was for kids, and how much of the weight of the world was on their shoulders, despite our promises that we'd look out for them.

"I don't care how involved she is", I clearly remember hearing from one teacher..."maybe you should get her to put all of that fantastic community stuff aside, and answer the questions at the end of chapter 3", as well as 4, 5, 6, 7...you get the point. I got the point, and that point was made louder and louder, until we got to the next point, which was the fast approaching conversation about not having enough earned credits to graduate, and when she'd have to communicate that to a small college in Central Maine, which was one of the remaining dim lights at the end of the tunnel. "Don't you dare think about relaxing the graduation requirements...she's got to pull herself out of this somehow."

*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?'*

Thankfully, the light persisted. We got to graduation, but it certainly wasn't painless, and to be honest, it wasn't real either. To replace one failed class, I created an independent science study based on inquiry and curiosity that was engaging, yet as a school principal in the middle of the masking and contact tracing era, I also became distracted and dropped the ball on creating the accountability piece. What was a solid plan for exhibiting learning to younger students and creating an exhibition hallway turned into "good enough, you got the idea". On the transcript it went.

Those of us scrambling to create workarounds to the workarounds didn't know any better than those who were demanding instant and terminal accountability. We were terrified of the impact that not graduating would have, yet equally fearful that we were just reinforcing the message that accountability doesn't matter...sending someone into the world with no guarantees other than "people will hopefully keep moving things out of your way".

In this case, there was nothing we could do to change the growing conditions, augment the soil, turn things around. In this student's own words, *"No matter how many extensions I was given or help I was offered, it came down to the fact that I was stuck. It didn't have to do with class. It was me, still recovering from not being at school, battling with undiagnosed ADHD. It was just time for something different, whether it was a job, or college. I couldn't learn in that atmosphere anymore. There was just so much burnout that I was surrounded by, including with teachers and peers."*

For people who like to make positive change in the world, this is infuriating. We try our best to be helpers, to live in the way of Christ, to guide others toward the light. We take up the call to be fishers of men, tenders of fig trees, and are frustrated beyond measure when our efforts seem to come up short, especially faced with those who would cut the fig tree down immediately. Jesus has an answer for that, too. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" In this text, Jesus says no to attempts to solve deep troubles with quick fixes, and rejects the desire to find direct correlations between suffering and sin. She didn't cause the problem, yet we can't fix the problem. We all are in need of grace, and grace only comes from a higher power.

In the end, this student was, by her own definition, extended a tremendous amount of grace. That grace, however...that didn't come from any of us. The teachers who wanted to see instant accountability through denying graduation were out for justice, and justice would indeed be getting what you deserve. Those of us offering extensions and workarounds...that was an attempt at mercy. Let's remember what the Reverend Cean James of Salt and Light Church says about mercy and grace, as discovered by our youth group last July. Pastor Cean tells us mercy is good, but it's not enough...that the thing that separates us as Christians from the rest of the world is our belief in grace. Mercy, he says is wiping the slate clean, and grace is God writing something good on a slate where you wrote something bad. Mercy is saying "I'm not going to punish you for what you've done, grace is God saying "I'm actually going to bless you". Grace is saying "not only am I not going to punish you, I'm actually going to use this to make you better and

stronger". Grace is not earned, not asked for and not given by humans. It's what we allow room for when we relinquish control.

The parable of the fig tree calls us to pause, and allow for God's grace to enter the equation. Let this tree grow for one more year, let me tend to it, and we'll see what happens. What a perfect message for Lent. Part of our process of discerning what to give up to bring us closer to God is giving up control. Allowing ourselves to be open to a future possibility that we do not control, and cannot manage. Allowing ourselves to be still and know that God is with us.

So, what happened? Grace happened. Barely a month into the first semester of college, this student was brought back down by a personal tragedy at home that would cause any reasonable human to finally give up learning and hide. It didn't turn out that way, though. Supported by a new yet loving partner, a continually wonderful family, and various support structures, she accepted her own loss of control, looked inward, and allowed room for grace to take over. One day at a time, one experience at a time, she persisted, and persevered. Here's the update I received just last week:

You'll be happy to hear that I finally learned how to learn! I'm now almost done with my junior year at college and I even made the President's list once (I've been on Honors or High Honors every other time)! I also took on the job of Community Assistant this year, which is the school's term for RA. I get to live in a single room and have a whole floor of residents that I get to make name tags for and I get to do a bulletin board every month!

I'd love to watch or read your sermon if there is a way for you to do that. Please don't hesitate to share anything about me or my experiences.

On the wall of my office is a photo I took of a neon sculpture at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, illuminating a room-sized quote from revolutionary futurist Stewart Brand. The sign starts with "This present moment used to be the unimaginable future", reduces it to "This moment used to be the future", and then goes dark, before repeating itself all over again.

This present moment used to be the unimaginable future. With God's grace, and our patience to accept it, may we find ourselves repeating that again and again, and marveling at just how far we've come.