

**March 23, 2025**  
**Luke 13: 6-9**  
**Rev. Kelley Becker**

This morning, I will do a weird thing...at least a weird thing for me. I will start my sermon by reading today's scripture. In the Gospel of Luke, this parable is placed right after a scene in which Jesus was told about some Galileans that Pilate had killed and he was asked if the people who were killed were worse sinners than other people. He responded, "...unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Also in that scene, Jesus was told about eighteen people who were killed when a tower fell. And again, he was asked if those people were worse sinners than others. And again, he responded, "...unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Jesus' point here, I think, was that violence and cruelty are not related to a person's sinfulness. Bad things do, in fact, happen to good people.

And now we come to today's story. This is Luke 13:6-9.

6 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.

7 So he said to the man working the vineyard, '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?'

8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.'"

I'm curious...how many of you remember hearing this story before? I know that I have read it before this week when I began researching for this sermon, but I will be honest, when I think about fig trees and Jesus, I think of him cursing an unproductive tree and the tree either instantly withering or being found withered the next day, depending on which gospel author tells the story. This story about a fig tree planted in a vineyard is not a story I have spent much time with.

Here's the thing, when I plan to take a Sunday off, I look at the sermon schedule and pick the Sunday that the least appealing text in the series will be preached. Sometimes it's a text I am tired of preaching about, but usually, it is one that for whatever reason, I just don't like. This Sunday's text would have been that Sunday. I blame John Becker for this unfortunate place I am in. I took last Sunday off because St. Patrick's Day is John's favorite day of the year, and we try to always celebrate it by leaving town. So, all of that to say, I missed preaching about the story of Mary and Martha, one of my favorites. Rev. Hubbard's sermon was stellar of course. But now, here I am stuck with the fig tree.

I read the text before I left on vacation so it could rattle around in my brain for a bit. And then when I returned to the office Wednesday, I read it again, along with a bunch of commentaries. Still, I felt very stuck with the fig tree. One commentator I read

listed a number of interpretation possibilities and ended with, "I don't think it's any of those." Perfect. Other commentators landed on one of the interpretations the other commentator had rejected.

I imagined a wall of balloons. Each balloon containing one of the options. And me with a blindfold and a dart. That's how I would decide what to say about this fig tree that I am stuck with.

Absent a wall of balloons, I read a couple of sermons other preachers have preached on this parable. I was comforted when I read one by Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber that began with her whining about having to preach on this text which she describes as a weird parable that talks about poop. She mentioned that she could relate to the fig tree that could not produce as she sat there unable to produce a sermon. Same, Nadia, same.

Because I had to start somewhere, I started with what I know about fig trees in the Bible. In ancient Judaism, storytellers used fig trees to talk about Israel's spiritual condition. What I mean is that there are numerous examples in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature of the fruitful fig tree used as a sign of blessing while the barren fig tree was used as a sign of a curse or judgment. Because the gospel authors draw from the Hebrew Bible to varying degrees, it should not surprise us that a fig tree or two would show up in the gospel narratives. The stories I mentioned earlier, the ones about Jesus cursing the unproductive fig trees, are a lot like the examples in the Hebrew Bible. In both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew the authors use the fig tree to critique the integrity of temple authorities who were in cahoots with the Roman Empire rather than prioritizing caring for the Israelite people. Additionally, in Mark's narrative, the fig tree story foreshadows the destruction of the temple. I am pretty sure the author of Luke had neither of these ideas in mind when he recorded this story in chapter 13.

Some commentators guess that this little tale before us today is the author of Luke's way of retelling the stories in Mark and Matthew. If that is true, they suggest that the unproductive fig tree symbolizes the people who weren't producing fruit, the unfaithful ones who needed to turn from their ways. If that is a valid interpretation, and it's probably as good as any other, who is the gardener? And who is the vineyard owner?

Let's play this out. If the unfaithful people are the fig tree, who is the vineyard owner? Traditionally, that part has been played by God because we tend to put God in the part of the one in charge. Who is the gardener then? Is it Jesus? Is Jesus the gardener who was caring for the unproductive tree? Maybe, but if so, Jesus told a story about his failure to nurture people into acting right. That doesn't seem very Jesus-y. Although, as a minister, I have lots of stories of my failure to make y'all act right. But I digress. I have to be honest, if this is the interpretation we are going with, this portrayal of God makes me very uncomfortable. So much for God being "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." The God I have experienced isn't a "cut the tree down" kind of God.

I believe God has been God long enough that a call to patiently, lovingly waiting for human beings to become who we were created to be seems more God's style. Maybe that's it. Maybe this parable comes along amid this anxious, fast-moving, constant "breaking news," instant gratification season to encourage us to choose to be different, to help us think about what waiting, from a faith perspective, could be about. Spoiler alert: Faithful waiting is not "doing nothing."

So, for a moment, let's strip this parable of its need to assign God and Jesus speaking roles. As I've mentioned before, the cool thing about parables is that we are able to see ourselves in the parable, sometimes in more than one way. Are you ever the vineyard owner, judging yourself and other people for not being more productive or not being productive in the ways you think you or they ought to be productive? While judging yourself you are not only the vineyard owner, you are the tree too. Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber said in her sermon, "[It's] like I'm my own defendant, judge, and jury at the same time." We all do it from time to time, but that's no way to live.

Then the gardener comes along to nurture the tree in ways that it had not been cared for in the previous 3 years. The gardener was willing to keep waiting for the tree to produce, but the story tells us that the plan was not to just sit there. The plan was to do what needed to be done to encourage growth while he waited.

From our own gardening experiences or perhaps from our science classes, we know there is a lot going on below the soil while we wait for any plant to produce. Journalist, author, and preacher, Rev. Jeff Chu writes, "Down below, the fig tree isn't just gathering strength; it's also building relationships. Soil-borne fungi are finding homes in its roots, boosting the tree's capacity to resist disease and take in nutrients. In return, the tree feeds the fungi." He continues, "Perhaps this parable is a gentle rebuke against those of us who are all too comfortable with our on-demand, instant gratification culture---and who believe the lie that we can control more than we actually do."

Hmmmm. Chu seems to be pointing out that what looks like being unproductive, or resting, for fig trees is actually part of the growing. His interpretation of the parable imagines that could be true for human beings as well. This Lenten series is about our tendency to demarcate good and evil, better or worse. In the same way traditional Christianity has mistaught us that Mary's faith was better than Martha's works, our culture (and possibly traditional interpretations of this parable) has mistaught us that growth is better than rest, and that rest is in itself unproductive.

Judaism does a much better job than Christianity (and modern culture) of talking about, even insisting on rest. God commands the Israelites to observe the weekly Sabbath--God rested on the seventh day of creation and therefore human beings, created in the image of God, must rest too. And even though the idea behind Sabbath

is not to produce anything, the observance of Sabbath does produce something. It produces balance and equity in our lives. Sabbath isn't just for the rich or the ones with pools in their backyards. Sabbath is supposed to be for everyone. Everyone needs to rest and life experience has taught us that rest is productive. And speaking as someone with a reputation for not resting, rest is also growth.

Perhaps it would help to connect this parable to the scene before it in which Jesus says twice, "...unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." In a sense, maybe Jesus was teaching a sort of radical equality. I wonder if his words in this scene hit differently if read this way: "But unless you turn your hearts, you too will not find flourishing or wholeness."

Rev. Jeff Chu writes "Maybe this parable is a word of reassurance—that, with patience and care, flourishing and wholeness can be found, even if it's not here in front of us right now. Maybe there is a divine solidarity that meets us amid what is still in the process of becoming and what is still not yet made whole."<sup>1</sup>

I wonder, who has been the gardener to the impatient you who judges yourself too harshly? Who is the one or are the ones who remind you that you are enough, that you have grown, and that you are worth caring for? And who is there to remind you that the best you, and the best everyone else, is still to come?

What if God is the gardener? What if God is the One faithfully waiting, and also steadfastly loving? Now that is an understanding of God that I can get behind. We do not serve a God who gives up on us or on anyone. We serve a God of second and third and fourth chances; a God who faithfully waits, knowing that in the waiting, even when she or we cannot see it, growth is taking place. God meets us in the struggle to prioritize rest and in the growth that it produces. God meets us amid our hyper-productivity and savior complexes and God meets us in the moments when we realize our lives are more like a hamster wheel than a journey toward wholeness.

This parable reminds us that in the space between rest and growth, and all the spaces in between, God is there, waiting, meeting, loving, and waiting some more. God is there in the messiness of the world becoming what it was created to be and our becoming who we were created to be. I am kind of glad I got stuck with this fig tree there is so much about it to love. Wherever you find yourself in this story, know that there is so much about you to love. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Chu, commentary written for Sanctified Art, "Everything [in] Between" Lenten series, 2025.