

A Journey Through The Vineyard

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Luke 13: 6-9

The Scripture passage I just read has been referred to as “the parable of the barren fig tree.” It can only be found in Luke’s Gospel. Both Mark and Matthew have the story of Jesus cursing a barren fig tree, and some scholars have suggested that this is Luke’s compassionate version of those stories. I don’t know. I do know that the story is rich in symbolism, with the vineyard representing the nation of Israel...the fig tree can be understood as Jerusalem, and the gardener as Jesus. For my purposes this morning, it is sufficient to say that the story’s main thrust is to call the nation of Israel and its people to repentance...*before it is too late*, but also to find in this story ways for us to relate to it spiritually.

As I look at this parable, a number of things come to mind and heart. ***First of all is the anger of the landowner.*** He wants the tree cut down for not bearing fruit during the first three years of its fruit bearing life. And you and I can relate to such anger. Each of us has those places within ourselves that do not bear fruit, and which cause anger.

Is it a lifeless, dispassionate relationship? Is it your career or work that started out promising, but is now a de-energizing ritual? Could your anger be originating from a general loss of meaning in life, perhaps fueled by the pain and loss our

emotions and spirit experience during times of transition? This loss of meaning can become intensified as the result of the death of a loved one, divorce, the loss of a job, or academic failure. Whatever the impetus, it is uncomfortable and it can erupt in anger.

And so I would suggest that we all take a spiritual inventory, turn inward as Quakers would suggest, and ask what is it within our lives that is not bearing fruit and that is causing such anger. Such a process of introspection can be emotionally and spiritually healing.

Secondly, I would ask us to identify with the impatience of the vineyard owner, and the patience of the gardener. Both of these are important to the life of the spirit. It is a matter of trying to discern in so many of the areas of our lives, when it is time to go and when it is time to stay. In the vernacular of our modern gambling culture, it is knowing “when to hold them and when to fold them.” And we can damage our spirits by being too impatient when patience is needed, and too patient when impatience is needed.

My father was a very wise man, who grew in wisdom as I became older. One day I came home for lunch following a class during my freshman year in college. He was seated at the kitchen table eating a sandwich and reading The Christian Century magazine. I excitedly told him about a planned student protest that I was

organizing on campus over...I forget what. As I shared with him my enthusiasm for such a protest, he continued to listen and quietly eat his sandwich. Finally, a half-hour later when there was a brief pause in my monologue, he looked up from his reading and said, “Jim, you do not have to die on every cross.”

No, we do not have to die on every cross over every issue. There is a time when patience is called for. But then there are those times when impatience is called for...times when the treatment of the poor must be protested...Times when we should be impatient with racism and discrimination and the unjust deportation of undocumented persons of color, who are following all of the rules. And at all time we should be impatient with the epidemic of domestic violence and child abuse.

And so, identify with the impatience of the vineyard owner, and with the patience of the gardener. May we seek to discover within our own lives when God is leading us to be more patient and when God is calling us to impatience.

A third way in which we can identify with this parable is in the plea for grace by the gardener. “One more year...please!” I don’t know about you, but I really find myself sympathetic with that little fig tree. It reminds me of the little Christmas tree that Charlie Brown picked out, that lost all of its needles before he got it home. Now, what I am about to say may be difficult for the type “A” personalities among us, but there are times when it is “okay” to be barren. There

are times when being in the wilderness is alright. As a matter of spiritual growth, “barrenness” and “wilderness” are important parts in the ebb and flow of the spiritual life.

During one of the Sacred Chaos seminars I have led for ministers, a minister said, “You know, I feel so empty right now...I cannot *lead*. All that I can do is *follow* and soak up the energy of those around me.” When we are feeling barren in the wilderness times of life, all that we can do is...to state it metaphorically...is “slosh” through the fertilizer of love and care that our friends and family can give us! We need GRACE...We need to feel that we are loved and accepted, “in spite of.” It is not going to be this way forever, but for right now we need grace.

The parables of Jesus are wonderful stories for our spiritual nurture. They are teaching tools designed to help us understand the God of love which he proclaimed, and to move us into a deeper understanding of who we are and what our purpose on this earth really is. I am convinced that our main purpose in this life is to grow spiritually. How this is played out in each of our lives will vary, but the underlying theme is always spiritual growth.

This parable of the barren fig tree offers us many entry points into the continuing process of growth in the spirit...It invites us to begin our own journey through God’s vineyard by...identifying with the anger and impatience of the landowner,

as well as identifying with the patience of the gardener. It also gives us the opportunity to reflect upon our need for grace and our need to offer grace to others. Such a journey is filled with new and exciting spiritual possibilities. As we continue our journey of spiritual growth, let us remember to sit loose, travel light, and always be open to new spiritual possibilities.