

“Got Junk? 1800-Repent”

The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

Luke 13:1-9

March 3, 2013

“Then he told a parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.’”

The English poet W.H. Auden wrote, “You cannot tell people what to do; you can just only tell them parables.” Jesus’ influence in his parables is felt even until today. He used parables to draw people, to help them relate to the real issues in their lives, and he challenged them to do their own discernment.

R&B Singer Erica Badou produced a song called “Bag Lady.” And, while I do not prescribe with some of the expressions used, I thought the message was quiet profound. The song says:

*“Bag lady, you are going to hurt your back,
Dragging all your bags like that...
Bag lady, you are going to miss your bus,
You can’t hurry up, ’cause you got too much stuff...
So, pack light...let it go, let it go, let it go.”*

Of course, the artist was not referring was to an actual bag lady, but, instead to the baggage that we carry as a results of our experiences in life.

During this season of Lent, I want to consistently invite us to adopt of discipline of introspection.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus addresses a theological issue that is centuries old - the issue of sin and judgment. The interchange between Jesus and his hearers concerning the Galileans and the victims of the tower falling are occasions for Jesus to make a point: “No, unless you repent, I tell you, you will perish.” He takes the occasion to speak about repentance and, yes, judgment.

The word “repentance,” or “metanoeo” in Greek, literally means: *to think differently, or afterwards, to reconsider (to feel compunction-regret)*. The root word *meta* is the same root for metamorphosis, which indicates that there are has to be a change in conduct or direction.

The Parable of the Fig Tree

So, Jesus follows with the Parable of the Fig Tree, which contains a message of both grace and judgment.

The landowner had planted a tree in his vineyard, and he figured that it was time to gather figs from it. But, after taking a look, he found that the tree was barren. The landowner comes to the conclusion that he may have two possible issues here: (1) the tree is worthless because it has not given fruit for three years in a row, or (2) the space it is taking could be used for a tree that could produce. Therefore, he concludes, it is time to get rid of it. It is time to take it down.

However, the caretaker asks for patience, and requests that the landowner give it another year.

It is interesting to know the reasons why a fig tree would not bear fruit. ¹

- 1) A fig tree would not bear fruit because of its age. Trees need to reach a certain maturity level to produce. Fruit is how a fig tree produce seeds. If a fig tree is not old enough to produce seeds, it will not produce fruit.
- 2) A fig tree may not be producing figs because it has too much nitrogen. This can be fixed by using a fertilizer with lower nitrogen, or adding some phosphorous to the soil.
- 3) A fig tree may not produce figs because of the watering conditions. When the tree has too much or too little water. Water stress will send the tree into survival mode, and the fig tree will not have the energy to invest in making fruit.

So, it makes sense to us why the caretaker said to the landowner -- give it another year. "Let me loosen the soil around it." Maybe it had drainage problems. Let me fertilize it.

This would be enough time to perhaps remedy some of the conditions that may be preventing the fig tree to give fruit -- patience is needed.

Similarly, God's grace is greater than God's judgment. We find ourselves often in the same predicament of the fig tree. There are reasons why we have not come to God in repentance and are still carrying around heavy burdens.

Why would we not bear fruit?

¹ www.gardeningknowhow.com/edible/fruits/figs.htm

Maybe we have not matured yet. We have not come to the point where we feel we the need to lay it down before God. It is possible that we have not realized our condition. Maybe we are entering the God's presence saying like that Pharisee that prayed ,“Thank youm God, that I am not like other people—robbers, evil doers, adulterers—or even this tax collector.” (Luke 8:11)

Maybe the conditions of our lives have hardened the soil around us, and we have gone in survival mode and hardened our hearts. Perhaps, we are just spiritually hungry and we do not have enough strength to identify our condition.

But, whatever the reasons may be, as Thomas Merton, wrote: “Only the man(woman) that has had to face despair is really convinced that he/she needs mercy. Those who do not want mercy never seek it. It is better to find God in the threshold of despair than to risk our lives in a complacency that has never felt the need of forgiveness.”²

How wonderful that each day is a day of grace! There is an opportunity to lay down our load in God's presence. Maybe then we can meet God in the garden, and there, allow God to turn our soil. Give us some nourishment, so that we can bear the fruit of the spirit: “Love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and more.” (Galatians 5:22-23). Amen.

²² Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, Pg. 21