

“Holy S@#%! Being God’s Pungent People...”

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20 March 2022

Scriptures: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Sermon:

Back when I was growing up on the farm in Kansas, our neighbor, Dewey Hostetler, had two very large commercial chicken houses. Now, these were not your quaint little farm-style henhouses that might hold a dozen or so laying hens. These were long metal buildings that housed about 5,000 plus caged birds each. Consequently, then, they had a whole lot of chicken manure to get rid of.

This meant that several times a year they would pump the septic tanks out and spread it all on their surrounding wheat fields. Now, chicken manure has an extremely pungent odor; it’s probably the worst of all the domesticated manures, and since we lived less than a mile away, it really didn’t matter which direction the wind was blowing for us to know when he was spreading his chicken s@#\$ (expletive). When I, or my siblings would complain, my dad would just take a deep breath and say, “free fertilizer!”

For you see, chicken manure’s strong stench comes from its high concentration of nitrogen. Nitrogen is the most popular ingredient in commercial fertilizers. Nitrogen helps lawns grow lush and green, gardens to grow quickly and produce large veggies and fruit trees to grow bigger fruits. But you do have to be careful because if you use too much nitrogen or if the chicken manure is too “fresh,” you can actually kill, or what we called, “burn,” the plants.

Of course, it would reek for days and for miles around! And since our little town of about 1,600 inhabitants was even closer to Dewey on the other side of his farm, I’m sure he had lots of really unhappy neighbors at least a couple of times each year . . . but he also had some very lush and productive wheat fields.

Like a lot of Jesus’ parables, this one about the fig tree, is not all that hard to understand. Harder, of course, are the daily applications he was asking us to apply to our lives. Most often this parable is connected with the six verses that proceed it roughly “shoehorned” with texts that don’t seem to fit?

Now those previous verses mention what might have been current events, one dealing with a politically sanctioned mass murder and the other a large number of accidental deaths at a construction site. But for reasons I will shortly explain, I will instead connect this parable with the verses that follow it because I think they include a convenient as well as an immediate object lesson that reinforces the themes of Jesus parable.

But first, the parable where I believe God was the vineyard owner, Jesus was the gardener, and God’s people (Jews, synagogue leaders, Christians, or even church folk today) were the fig tree. As we know from the very beginning, in the very first verses of the very first chapter of the bible, God loves to plant gardens.

In this analogy, God has planted those chosen people in a garden where they will have every possible advantage needed to thrive. But year after year, the vineyard owner has yet to harvest any fruit.

Now, having been to Palestine myself, I can tell you that fertile ground is in rather short supply, so you certainly can't waste any space growing fruit trees that do not produce fruit. But Jesus' parables were also filled with lots of symbols, and so many of them can have multiple meanings. For instance, the number of years looking for fruit and not finding any, was three. We know from the gospels, that Jesus' active ministry lasted three years. And I think we would all agree that he had a very productive ministry.

Meanwhile, the religious leadership of God's chosen people had been failing quite miserably to produce anything for quite some time! Not only were they failing to produce, according to Jesus, they were actually perverting God's teachings and actually oppressing God's people. And in the end, those perverse gardeners even chopped down the most productive tree in the garden when they killed Jesus. Okay, I know that now I'm calling the fig tree Jesus, but that's sort of how fluid parables can be and how levels of meaning can simultaneously exist.

Which now brings us to the fourth year in the parable, where further cultivation and fertilizing takes place. On one level, this indicated God's patient mercy by giving that unproductive 'old time religion' one more chance to turn it around. But since Luke and his readers know that that didn't happen, the parable sets free those folks who truly desire to follow God's way. It permits them leave the old socio-religious structures that were chaining them down and to begin traveling a new religious path that God had originally intended all of humanity to walk.

Then, conveniently, into the synagogue shuffles a horribly bent over woman to immediately reinforce Jesus' point. It is important to remember that the Mosaic laws governing the Sabbath were given to the Children of Israel as they wandered the wilderness of Sinai after they fled Egypt. The Exodus was a collective journey of recently freed slaves who were released from their bondage by a God who heard their cries.

Jesus understood this primary meaning of Sabbath since he called to the woman, "...you are **freed** of your affliction." Sabbath keeping is to be defined as a time for liberation! So, it makes further sense then that when Jesus laid his hands on her she immediately stood up straight. Or as MLK Jr. once said so eloquently, your oppressor "can't ride you when your back is straight!"

The tree of God's people produces liberation and its fruit is freedom, and yes, it does taste as sweet as ripened figs. But did you know that figs are also packed with nutrition? Two medium figs contain 75 calories and phenolic antioxidants. They contain lots of calcium and so help keep your bones strong. Figs also help prevent breast, prostate, and colon cancer. And for many of us this might be important, during Roman times figs were considered to have restorative properties that could help the elderly lose their wrinkles and look younger.

But let's return to the lesson. For 18 years, Luke tells us, the religious establishment had failed the bent old woman. Those establishment leaders had failed to help her to be released from the causes of her disfigurement. We are told that it was a "spirit." Was it the "spirit" emanating from the large landowners who demanded that their poor laborers bend over and work in slave-like conditions tending their fields. Or could it have been a "spirit"

from heavy daily domestic labor that was demanded in the homes of the wealthy that had bent her back? Or maybe it was a “spirit,” similar to one currently in our nation, that refuses the poor access to necessary health care.

And now, in spite of their failures, they had the gall to complain that Jesus was too impetuous, too quick to heal her on the Sabbath. Yes, Jesus actually did something and it was the religious leaders who ended up getting all bent out of shape! Jesus called them a bunch of phonies to their face!

It’s kind of like complaining about the pungent odors of potent organic fertilizer that will one day produce lush green fields and heads heavy with grain.

Last year, many of us labored together to create a garden right here on our church’s property, in the middle of the city. With lots of hard work, we also put in a patio, put up some benches, and set up tables so that all our neighbors can come, sit down, take a load off, and rest for a while. We also put in planter boxes, grew various kinds of veggies, and even planted some flowers.

So why have we done this? Well, maybe it is for mostly symbolic purposes, since we believe that the poor deserve not only food but beauty as well?! But I think our biggest hope is that it can become a place that is safe, a space that is quiet, so folks can sit down and rest, a place where minds and emotions can slow down and find peace. Maybe it can also be a space where relationships can be cultivated and where people can come together and lean on each other.

Sadly, some in our city see only the dirty, disheveled, the obnoxious, and the hopeless stranger as a danger or threat to their safety. To some we are an irritant and an eyesore, and just seem to stink up the neighborhood - too much manure?

But in our garden, we will keep on planting, cultivating, and putting on the manure, because we are convinced that under all that dirt, scruffy clothing, and sometimes incoherent babbling of those who rest on our patio, lies beauty in a flower that is waiting to blossom.

There is incredible beauty in all of us and each one of us is being attended to by the most perfect loving gardener of all. And this Gardener lavishes upon us such tender loving care in anticipation of this blossoming into joyful beauty.

God’s ways are not our ways! And God sees what we cannot. God’s way will always free us from what keeps us in bondage! Like the gardener, Jesus doesn’t give up on us, but patiently continues to nurture us even in those times when we stubbornly refuse to produce any of those fruits of the spirit.

The tree does not earn this loving care, but Christ’s living water and lots of Holy Manure are dumped on us none-the-less. I know that at times, it can be difficult for us to accept this grace, let alone even imagine it. But God’s way is in stark contrast to our western culture, which urges us to be self-sufficient and earn our way, basing our identity on the way we make money.

True religion then expresses itself through abundantly generous sharing of those gifts to others, who like us, are also undeserving. And the proof of gratitude is shown in joy-filled generosity!

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