

March 20, 2022 – Luke 13:1-9

My mother loves to garden. She can't do as much any more, but in my childhood, I was surrounded by flowers. Backyard. Front yard. It seemed like every spring I was helping her dig out a new flowerbed. Put down a new layer of mulch. Haul away wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of weeds and brush from an area she had just cleared. We had a fairly sizable yard and it felt like my mother was determined to fill every square inch of it with flowers.

Unfortunately, I do not have her green thumb. Oh, I understand the science of gardening just fine. I understand about sunlight and moisture and soil types and pH levels. I even remember some of the minutia I learned in my college botany class back when I was a biochemistry major.

But knowing all of this really hasn't helped much. Botany may be a science. But gardening is an art. It's about having an intuition for a plant's needs. And an instinct for where it's going to thrive. And a passion for seeing it succeed. And the patience to wait until the plant is ready to grow and blossom, regardless of when you want it to blossom.

I don't have that intuition, or that instinct, or that passion, or that patience. And as a result, my adult life has been one failure after another with every kind of vegetable or flower you can imagine. House plants. Outdoor beds. Greenery. Flowers. It doesn't really matter. They all die in the end. The one success story I can claim is the hydroponic Aerogardens that we have growing herbs in our kitchen. But even that feels like cheating. It's the machine doing most of the work, after all.

In general, plants are... fickle. They require knowledge and a great deal of care. Care for their physical needs of sunlight, water, soil, and nutrition. And care for their growth. A true concern for their needs and a desire for their success. And even then, sometimes they just don't respond the way you want them to.

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that plants are one of the most common analogies the Bible uses to describe... us. To describe humanity. It's all over the New Testament.

In Matthew, we are wheat that requires labor to be harvested and a careful eye to sort out the weeds among us. In John, we are the branches of a grape vine. We cannot exist apart from the main body of the vine, which is Jesus Christ. St Paul refers to us as branches grafted on to an olive tree that's had its own branches broken off. Though the Jews were the tree that God had planted, we Gentiles have been grafted on and now grow as part of that tree. There are still more examples scattered all through Scripture.

And in today's lesson, we are fig trees. Now, fig trees were an important part of the economy in that day. The trees grow rather quickly, with fruit in less than 5 years. They're easily planted. You just shove a green branch into the ground and it'll probably take root.

And figs themselves are an exceptional fruit. Sweet, highly nutritious, and easily dried and transported, making them an ideal cash crop to ship all over the Roman Empire. Dried figs, olive oil, and wine were the "big three" of Middle Eastern agriculture.

So Jesus was talking about something highly familiar here. A fig tree... but a fig tree that's on a vineyard. Not on an orchard. And most likely owned by someone fairly wealthy. After all, there really were pretty much only two classes in the Roman Empire at that time: the wealthy who owned the land, and the poor who worked the land.

So here's this fig tree, planted by a wealthy vineyard owner who wanted his own supply of fresh picked figs. And it's 3 years old. Now, from what I've read, 3 years is the bare minimum for a fig tree to start producing fruit. In fact, unlike grape vines, which need to be pruned constantly to continue producing fruit, you don't prune young fig trees much at all because they don't produce fruit on anything but 3-year-old growth.

So this vineyard owner has high expectations of this fig tree. He is expecting perfection out of this fig tree. It is there to produce figs for him. It has been given exactly enough time to start producing figs. And he is angry when it does not start performing on schedule. He is ready, in fact, to simply cut it down and start over with something else in its place.

And this is God's view of humanity. Which is, honestly, pretty harsh. But, at the same time, completely fair. We exist because God wanted us here. He doesn't need us. We are not his cash crop upon whom his livelihood depends. He has an entire vineyard at his disposal for that. But he likes us nonetheless. We're appealing to him. He made us for a reason.

Yet, if we're not going to fulfill his purpose for us, then what's the point of having us here? We're just taking up space. If we're not bearing fruit for our Heavenly Father and Creator, then we have no reason for existence. If we're not glorifying him with our lives and living righteously and obeying his law, then we're just fruit trees without fruit. We're utterly useless. And we deserve to be cut down and tossed into the fire. End of story.

But the vinedresser – the day-to-day caretaker of the vineyard – has a different view of this fig tree. He's not a cold botanist. He's a gardener. He cares for his plants. He loves them. Yes, they're just grape vines. But they're his grape vines. Yes, this is just a fruitless fig tree. But it is his fig tree.

And he cannot bear to give up on it. He cannot tolerate the thought that this tree wasn't given every single opportunity to grow and to produce fruit. He understands the art of caring for plants. He understands that fig trees aren't perfect.

That you can give them everything they need and they still don't always respond the right way. That sometimes you need to try over and over and over again to get a tree to grow before you find that perfect combination of elements and the tree blossoms into what it was created to be.

But it's not always easy. It's not always easy for the vinedresser. And it's not always easy for the fig tree. He has to dig up all the soil around it. Disturb it's pleasant home and expose its roots. And then he has to bury those roots in manure. He has to pile on this stinking, disgusting waste, until the tree is up to its eyeballs in... fertilizer.

And then he has to wait. He has to wait for an entire season of this tree's life to go by before anything that has happened to it takes effect. Before there's even any hope of seeing fruit produced.

No, being tended by a gardener is not always pleasant for a fig tree. Being tended by our Lord is not always pleasant for each of us. Sometimes it takes having our world torn apart. It takes being buried in the worst that this world can toss on us. It takes waiting and waiting and waiting for an entire season of our lives to go by before we see any change at all.

But in the end, Christ is making us into what we were created to be. He's making us into something truly pleasing to the Father's eye. He's making us into a tree with life and growth. With healthy branches capable of growing more trees.

And with so much fruit in our lives that God would never dream of cutting down or casting us into the fire. Because he is working in us the fruits of faith and forgiveness. The fruits of repentance. The fruits of the Holy Spirit working within us.

Under our Lord's care, we become the creatures God created us to be. Under his mercy, even when we see no fruit in our lives, we need not fear being cut down and abandoned to the flames. Because he is not only the just and fair land owner. He is also the patient vinedresser. Waiting until the last possible day – waiting until the last day of our lives, waiting until the last day of this earth – to finally cast us into the fire. Giving us every opportunity to be the people of God he has called us to be. And by his work in us, we will live forever in the vineyard of our God. Amen.