

An Owner, a Gardener, and a Tree – Rev. Dr. Kimberly Heath, March 23rd 2025

Wall Street United Church

Luke 13:6-9

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 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?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”

I have a Ficus tree— more commonly known as a Weeping Fig tree— in my office. Someone donated it more than a decade ago when it got too big for their home. It’s about 7 or 8 ft tall. It is mostly happy in my office. I’m not amazing with plants but somehow, I manage to keep things more or less alive. The tree in my office has survived mostly because it likes the sunshine it gets from the big beautiful stained-glass windows. And, it likes the coffee. That’s mostly what it gets, day-old, cold, black, dark-roast coffee. I don’t have a sink you see, so it’s a win-win situation. It takes my leftover coffee and in return I let it take up space and drop leaves on my office floor.

This morning, on the second Sunday of Lent and on the Sunday of our Annual General Meeting, I want to reflect on a parable that Jesus told about a fig tree.

But I want to dig into the parable itself. Jesus often taught and preached using parables — stories that help people to think more and to think differently about life and the kingdom of God. The neat thing about parables – and this one in particular – is that there isn’t an obvious meaning. Parables often leave us with more questions than answers.

So this morning let’s wonder together about what the meaning could be for you today, and for the church on this AGM Sunday and for the people of God.

There are three characters in this parable: there’s an owner, a gardener and there’s a tree.

Owner

The owner owns the land. He’s got a business to run and wants things to be as

profitable as possible. He's paying for seedlings, he's paying for the workers, he's paying for tools and animals and whatever else is needed for the operation; and the whole thing only works when fruit gets sold at the market. He has not planted a fig tree as a decoration for his house or his office. The purpose of the tree is to bear fruit. This owner seems a touch on the impatient side. Any fruit tree worker knows it takes time for a tree to mature and start bearing fruit. But he's not going to wait forever before he cuts his losses and moves on.

Traditionally the owner has been seen as representing God. God is seen as coming with judgement on a people that God created to produce good fruit, and God is not finding that fruit. God is not finding faithfulness, not finding justice, not finding mercy.

We're not really keen on the 'God-as-judge' image. We want God to be an easy-going guy or a cuddly teddy bear. But God's total goodness means that there is no room for evil and injustice. When things are not as they should be, when innocent people are bombed, detained, defrauded, when systems benefit the rich and leave the poor to fend for themselves, then it is okay and right to be critical. Now there isn't an implied injustice in this story, but there is an implication that things are not how they should be.

But I wonder if instead of God we could imagine the **church as the owner**, maybe even this church.

Last year we completed our **Fearlessly Forward Strategic Plan**. Part of that plan was about leaning into God and discerning the way forward. What are we called to grow in this church and what are we called to not grow? In farming and life sometimes it is good to say 'no.' One of the things we found is that this church does a lot, with limited resources of money and people. We prayerfully determined that there were things that we wanted to invest our time in and they include:

1. **Spiritual Vibrancy**: helping people to deepen their faith in Jesus is our primary goal.
2. **Intergenerational Engagement**: creating opportunities and connections for families, youth and seniors is important to us.
3. **Community Outreach**: having Wall Street be a centre for community and connection inside the walls and making a difference beyond the walls are high values for us.

4. **Leadership Empowerment:** developing leaders and creating structure and governance that empowers leaders is a need.

5. **Operational Sustainability:** where we acknowledge the limitations of resources and the need for careful planning when it comes to growing and maintaining the budget and the building.

In farming and in life, sometimes more good comes when we say ‘**No**’ to what is not life-giving and ‘**Yes**’ to something that is.

So as a church we need to have the courage to ask “Was it a good idea to plant a fig tree in the middle of the vineyard?” We’re pretty good at grapes, but we’re not so effective in the fig department. Maybe it’s time to focus our energy on what this church is called to and let other churches or agencies do other good work.

I wonder — **Can you see yourself as the owner?** What in your life is sapping energy that you are no longer called to? I really don’t like saying no. I had to say ‘no’ to an Ottawa church that wanted me to preach there. I looked at my schedule, and it’s going to be a very busy spring for me. I need to focus my energy on this church and the work I need to do in my nomination as Moderator. I patted myself on the back after I called and apologized and said I couldn’t fit it in. People remind me that ‘no’ is a complete sentence. I wonder where you need to be an owner in your life? Where do you need to act and say “This relationship needs to end. This habit needs to stop. I need to put energy here instead of there!”?

The Tree

What about the tree?

Traditionally people have seen the people of God — perhaps Jesus’ own religion, and the Jewish people, as the tree.

(I want to add a word of caution that we be mindful of anti-semitism. Anti-semitism is on the rise — all forms of racism are on the rise. We need to be critical of governments, individuals and policies that are oppressive and unjust, but we never want to paint a whole people, like the Jewish people or Palestinian people or American people, or you name it, with one brush.)

Jesus was frequently critical of his own religious leaders. Fruit is something that nourishes and gives life to others. Often the leadership was not feeding people and giving them life, but instead placing heavy burdens on them, with legalistic rules

and taxes that were barriers to God and to life. The way they practiced religion was not bearing good fruit. What is good fruit? Galatians 5:22-23 says:

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**”*

Where are we **as a church** bearing fruit, and how are we not? How are we called to bring life to people who come here, to the community and to the world?

What about in your life? **I wonder if you can imagine being that tree?**

Have you ever felt judged? One guy over here says you’re worthless, you don’t belong, you’re not good enough or smart enough, and then there’s the other guy throwing crap at you (calls it “fertilizer”) for your own good.

That fig tree is at the mercy of a lot of forces beyond its control — the impatient owner who might act on a whim or an executive order to uproot her, the gardener who is overworked and has so many other plants and trees to take care of (and might be able to schedule you in for a mental health assessment sometime next year!) And then there’s the sun and the rain or lack of rain, and the soil that the fig tree was planted in in the first place. There are so, so many factors beyond the tree’s control.

There’s so much going on in the world that feels (and is) beyond our control. The needs are everywhere, and the little good we do feels like a drop in an ocean of pain and need. It is discouraging and depressing. If you’ve ever felt hopeless or helpless you might know what it’s like to be a tree planted in Mr. Bigshot’s vineyard — I wonder if he drives a Tesla?

What about God? (Nah... God would drive a Honda because God wants everyone to be in “one Accord.” 😊) I wonder if we could imagine that **God is the fig tree?**

What if we come to God expecting good things and we don’t seem to find them? We pray for help, for healing, for peace, for justice, for strength, for provision, for fruit, and all we get are leaves.

What is our role in those seasons when it seems that the blessings stop? How do we approach the Tree of Life when it feels like there’s not a lot of life coming to us or to others?

Now I don’t think that God causes bad things to happen — God is good, all the

time. But there are seasons that are difficult for us and for the world. We're in one now. It feels like we're in a meaner, less generous world. Or perhaps the loss is personal — the loss of a loved one, or a job or a relationship.

There's a verse from the prophet Habakkuk that talks about a fig tree that's not producing fruit. "Though the fig tree does not bud" it begins – and this is how Habakkuk responds when he finds it that way:

*Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

Can we seek God and praise God and practice gratitude even when the tree is bare?

The Gardener

Let's move to the **gardener**.

The gardener encourages the owner to wait, to give it time. The gardener promises to tend to the tree.

This is the season of Lent, a season of going deeper in our faith. Lent calls us to be that gardener. Many scriptures call on us to "wait for the Lord." In other words, our call is to spend time with God, and to somehow trust the life that is there for us even if it's not what we expected or when we expected it.

"My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning watch for the morning." Psalm 130:6

"But those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint." Isaiah 40:31

"Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You also must be patient and be strong in heart, because the Lord's coming is near." James 5:7-8

As a church we are also called to be a gardener. The gardener is patient. While the owner is strategic, the gardener is hopeful. The gardener believes in the figs that are not there yet.

It's spring! Yay! The best part about this early spring is not what currently is — cause right now it's mud and sticks, dog poo and garbage— it ain't pretty! But we know what is to come: buds and blossoms, crocuses and daffodils.

Part of the reason that we as Christians and as the church work for justice is that *we practice hope*. We are called to practice hope, to not grow weary or give up on the world God created and loves.

We have a vision of what should be and can be: a world where every child matters, where every human is created in the image of God. A world that cares about the suffering and shares wealth and resources. A community of real hospitality where all are welcome, and where we share wonderful meals around the table. Where we get to know each other and love each other even if some are weird or rough around the edges — because we are also weird and rough around the edges and because God so loves us. We have felt God's love and believe in the power of God's love to transform. *God so loves the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.*

Do you remember when Mary met the gardener? It turned out the gardener wasn't just a hired hand, but the risen Lord — Jesus, who died for her and for each of us and who intervenes on our behalf and says "Have mercy on her, on him, on them, give this one just a little more time. I love this tree. I love this one just as they are. With a little more love, and a bit of crap from the world mixed in, they will grow and thrive and bear fruit and make a difference to others."

Thank God for the gardener who loves us and believes in us and this fragile beautiful world! May we work and grow in the vineyard with wisdom and a critical eye, and with patience and hope. Amen.