

Three Years. No Fruit.  
Luke 13:1-9  
24 March 2019  
Lent 3C  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

Becky Meriwether, Priscilla Stovall, Caroline Durham, and I attended an event on Friday morning hosted by *The Atlantic Monthly* about race and justice in New Orleans. It's a series they are producing around the country funded by a MacArthur grant to look at questions of mass incarceration, the system supporting prisons, and all of the intersection conversations that surround the carceral state. The underlying question in every session came back to the inherent value and worth of black and brown lives. Do we as a nation believe some people are inherently more dangerous, more broken, more in need of fixing, more worthy of incarceration, less worthy of being seen as fully human?

We have an elaborate system in place in our country that answers "yes" to that question. And every discussion of recidivism, mental health, education, poverty, equity, and opportunity came back to the essential question about the full humanity of all people. It was telling as certain key officials who are tasked with incarcerating human bodies and counting the "inventory" in our local jail seemed oblivious to the complexities of value and worthiness of a life and unable to incorporate human narrative into their work. Their imaginations were bound like the roots of a tree that has outgrown its pot. Stifled. Locked. Unable to move beyond the containers in which they live and move and have their being.

We humans have been struggling with this question about human worth for a long, long time, and its the essence of the question being brought before Jesus on this day when he gets to preaching about a fig tree. Jesus has been teaching in front of a crowd so large that people have even trampled on one another, the previous chapter reports. He goes back and forth between the crowd and the disciples, the crowd and an individual, the crowd and a small group. At the start of chapter 13, we read that "some present" bring up the issue of a violent and hateful act at the hands of Pilate. Folks in the crowd have been asking about judgment—about settling grievances and getting justice (not so much *seeking* justice as that's

something else)—so it's likely this story is raised out of that punitive context. Jesus hears a question within the story that's not just about the despicable act by Pilate but about the worthiness of the people who died. Did this evil happen because of the kind of people they were? Is this man blind because of his parents' sin? Do bad things happen to bad people?

Because Jesus hears the questions within their story, he doesn't just engage their horrible story but brings up *another* horrible story, as though *that's* the game they're playing. Because horrible stories in the news are easy to come by, he picks another one they all know; one that is a random accident and not a direct aggression. Then Jesus asks the same question about the worthiness of the victims. He talks about sin. He's poking the people asking the question with this sin thing—do you think these tragedies happened because they're worse sinners than you? I want us to shift this question to worthiness because I think that's what he's getting at here—were they of less worth than you? Were they more deserving of oppression and violence and the arbitrariness of life? Were they more marked for death than you are?

The people who bring the story to Jesus are focused on this dark and toxic acts of leader...this arrogant, ruling, public figure who works under the authority of Emperor Tiberius. Do you recall that this whole Jesus story Luke is telling is happening in the 13th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius? These aggressive rulers who "other" and dehumanize people with their violent taxation and their political categorizations. We have no context at all for why Pilate has these people killed, but in the tragic story of the Galileans, Pilate mocks their religious practice and devalues their lives in the actions following their deaths. And as word or rumor, whichever it may be, spreads through the land of these heinous acts of violence, Pilate's actions demonstrate his belief that he is more human than they are and more worthy of life than they are. Do the folks repeating the story agree with him? Will Jesus be on the side of Pilate with this one? Did the Galileans deserve a humiliating, disrespectful end to their lives?

I think Jesus can hear that same thinking in the gossip being brought to him guised as concern. Oh, did you hear about that awful thing Pilate did to *those* people? What do you think about that, Jesus? We Southerners know this trick. How do we end our very best gossip? Did you hear about Sue Ellen and how she split her pants

at the grocery store because she put on so much weight after the divorce? *Bless her heart. We need to pray for her.* And lest the listening audience believe that death and violence and disdain only exist for “those people,” Jesus reminds them of a second rotten story. I don’t particularly want to dwell in these rotten stories today, but here we are. Smack dab in the middle of Lent with one awful story matched by a second, and Jesus is willing to face the dark realities of the stories themselves and the questions that surround them head on. He doesn’t blink. He isn’t uncomfortable. He holds death loosely in his hands as though he’s saying...from dust you come and to dust you will return. Death is not rare. Violence is not rare. Narcissistic rulers who dehumanize the populace aren’t rare.

“You know what is rare?” Jesus asks as he holds their attention in the palm of his hand right alongside these rotten death stories, “Let me tell you about this fig tree that produced nothing.” What’s not rare is a landowner who sees a lack of product and wants to ditch the tree altogether to move on to the next opportunity for revenue. What is rare is this gardener who stares at a fruitless fig tree and can’t bear to watch it be cut down. One more year, he says. Give me one more year. Let me work on the soil around it. Let me trim some of these leggy branches. Let me be sure it’s getting the right amount of water and drainage. Let me look for worms and signs of life around the roots. Give me one more year to work with this beauty to draw out her fruit.

In the face of evidence to the contrary, the gardener places a bet on life. On growth. On new beginnings and fresh possibilities. The tree is worthy of more care and nurture. More life. The gardener has eyes only for what can grow in fertile soil and believes in his capacity to bring fruit to life.

Immediately, my mind goes to another gardener story in John 20: Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you

are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

John's gospel holds my very favorite half-verse about resurrection, "Thinking he was the gardener..." Was he playing in the dirt? Was he smelling the night blooming jasmine? What was it about his posture and presence that made her think he was the gardener? Not a soldier. Not an angel. Not a political leader. A gardener. People have come to Jesus with a story of the worthiness of people disrespected in their death, and Jesus responds with a story of a gardener who reaches into the dirt to make life flourish despite the evidence to the contrary. The gardener sees the worthiness of the creation and knows the conditions needed to draw out blossoms and shoots and fruit where there presently are none.

The folks in the crowd bring Jesus a question about violent death as a sign of someone's sinfulness. And Jesus throws out another story to change the perspective. You're focused on how the end of a life story tells the story of a life itself. Death is not the story—life is. How will you live? What will you do with the space between the dust from which you come and the dust to which you will return? What kind of fruit will you produce? What will you do when you realize you're producing nothing? How will you tend and nurture and support these wild and precious lives?

In the midst of terror and in the face of violence, in the presence of death and in the absence of growth, God is still cheering for life and vitality. One more year. Give me one more year.

Janet Hunt writes, "Jesus isn't really speaking of trees and lilac bushes here. He is actually speaking of the people God so loves and God's unending patience with all of us. So much so that even when it appears we will never bear fruit, even when we show no sign of repenting and returning to the One who gave us all we are and hope to be in the first place --- even then God would give us one more year."<sup>1</sup>

Friends, this is our work. We're called to the work of tending the garden. We're called to the work of repairing and restoring the soil not just for our own growth but

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<sup>1</sup> <http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2013/02/one-more-year.html>

to guarantee others also have the right conditions for growth. We're called to this work here as a community of faith—nurturing and supporting one another to be sure—but also tending the soil and preparing the conditions for our collective fig tree to bear fruit.

We're taking on some ambitious goals over the next year—planting a Center for faith and action, setting tables for conversations around social justice that lead to real change and shared good in our world, raising the money to support that work—that's some major soil tending. We need gardeners to show up, tend the soil, and prepare this place for bearing real fruit—fruit that will endure.

To reimagine what church can be and do in the 21st century. To reimagine our role in dismantling systems that devalue and diminish the worthiness of people. To reimagine how the life of a person of faith actually gets lived out. To reimagine this whole thing that we're doing here week and week out. That's the work of a gardener. That requires a gardener's eye—looking at a patch of weeds and knowing what to pull out and what to plant, scooping up a handful of dirt and recognizing the grey dustiness where worms should be making a rich blackness, knowing how to till and turn until the conditions are right for life, envisioning a line to follow and expand a bed where flowers will grow. The stuff of faith is not about dying but living; not about shame and punishment but about grace and thriving. One more year. One more year. What can we do, with God's help, if we commit to training as master gardeners for just one more year?