

Spread it Around by Holly C. W. Aastuen  
Luke 13:1-9 March 7, 2010

A friend of mine describes his experience of meeting his wife's extended family for the first time. He had met some of the family at the wedding, but not everyone could make the trip. Many of the people in her family farmed and some felt they couldn't take the time away from their crops. One woman who was unable to make the trip was her Great Aunt Dorothy. Great Aunt Dorothy, upon meeting my friend, gestured him over to her and, knowing that he was going to seminary said to him, "Young man, I have a question for you: Do you know how the church is like manure?"

He replied, "I have no idea."

She continued, "If it all piles up it gets hot and stinky and it burns, but if you spread it around, it'll do a whole lot of good."

Now I don't know if that was farming advice or church advice or both, but either way Great Aunt Dorothy knew what she was talking about.

The story of the day is about a fig tree that didn't bear fruit, which, I am told, is quite a feat because fig trees are among the easiest fruit trees to grow if you live in the right kind of climate. The man who had had it planted had waited three years for the fig tree to bear fruit and finally in frustration ordered it to be cut down rather than let it continue to use up the space and the soil.

Sometimes when a tree or a person isn't doing what they're supposed to the most merciful thing to do for all involved is to stop the pretense that they are going to produce and free them for another calling.

I once had an interview for a job at a church that was looking for someone to run their youth program. The interview went well and the people were favorably impressed with my credentials. I was interested in helping the youth at this young and seemingly vibrant church, until I heard a member of the interview committee say this: "Our youth are pulled in every direction with sports, and plays and school and musical groups. What we need in this church is a program that entices the kids to come to church and have fun, a program that makes them want to bring their friends and grow the church. We need an attractive program for these active youth." As I looked around the table I could see every head nodding.

Maybe it was the tone with which he said it, maybe it was the feeling that they were looking for a savior for the whole church via the youth program, maybe it was just my natural reluctance to put one more activity on an already busy schedule that made me say, "It sounds like what they really need is rest."

When I saw their blank looks and a few disapproving scowls, I tried to back pedal: "What I mean is that they need a program to help them grow closer to God and to one another." I don't remember exactly what else was said, but soon after

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that exchange, the interview was done and I was thanking them for the interview, sure that I had blown my chance.

When I got a call the next day offering me the job, it was my turn to be shocked. They clearly hadn't liked my approach or what I said, so what were they doing offering me the job?

I told them I needed a day to think about it, but as I got off the phone I got the strong feeling that I shouldn't take the job. We were operating on different plane—I wanted to offer the kids relationships, they wanted me to build program. I wanted to give the kids with frantic schedules a place to rest and renew, the committee wanted me to have something to offer them that was even more exciting than their sports and other extra-curricular activities. I thought about it on and off all that day, then called them back the next day.

When I turned down the job offer, the man on the phone was sad, but not surprised. He said, "We had hoped to have a staff in place before the beginning of September and here it is just two months before September and we have no pastor, no associate pastor, no youth director."

As we hung up at the end of our conversation, I knew I had made the right choice. Even though the pay would have been really nice, I just wasn't the right person for them and they weren't the right place for me.

Sometimes the most merciful thing to do is to cut off the relationship.

But in the parable of the fig tree, that wasn't the choice the gardener wanted to make. "Give it one more year," he pleaded, "and I will give it some extra love and attention and see if I can get it to produce."

Our God is a God of second chances. And even when God finds that the things that God wants for us isn't taking root, we are given second chances. Even when we don't respond to the goodness and grace of God with righteous lives and repentant hearts, God still forgives and forgives and forgives.

The patience God has with us is limitless.

Pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner used to tell of a state-run mental hospital long ago where truly desperate cases were relegated to a back ward. The psychiatrists and other medical staff (intentionally or unintentionally) avoided this ward, making only the bare minimum of calls and writing off the patients there as extremely difficult. Then a women's group from a local church began, as a matter of compassion, to visit the patients in this hospital. No one bothered to tell them that the patients in the back ward were abandoned cases, so they visited them regularly, bringing flowers, fresh baked cookies, prayer, cheerfulness and mercy. Before long, some of the patients began to respond, a few of them even

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becoming healthy enough to move to other wards. In many ways this was merely a church group doing what church groups do. But at another level, this was a sign of God's mercy, a comfort and compassion for those who felt they didn't deserve any.

In the Bible story, the gardener was going to make the fig tree his priority for the coming year and with his extra attention who knows what will happen? Almost everything flourishes with a little extra love and attention.

Who knows if the fig tree in the vineyard is the earth, maybe it's the church, maybe it's your life and mine. Jesus isn't giving up on any of us—you, me, the church, the whole earth. There's hope in this parable—don't cut the tree down. But there's also urgency—give me one more year. (Rev. Barbara Lundblad)

It's a story of repentance, if turning around—away from the previous path and turning toward what God wishes for our lives. Repentance isn't a fruit problem, it's a root problem. Our repentance isn't dependent upon how good or how bad we are. It's dependent on our dependency upon God's power. It's not a matter of saying "I will do better," but a matter of saying, "Will you help me?" for if we repent without the help of God, it isn't repentance but a self-improvement program. Repentance isn't repentance without God.

From what do we need to repent? We need to ask ourselves hard questions: Am I stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Do I refuse to believe that I can be forgiven, carrying from year to year a burden of guilt? Am I so busy making a living that I've forgotten to make a life? Jesus gives us the space to question our lives and re-examine who we are and then make the decision about where we need to pay more attention and grow deep roots.

Could this be the year? We hear that as a threat. There's not much time left. But Jesus' parable is meant more as a promise than a threat: "I'm going to do everything I can to help this tree live and bear fruit..."

Who knows? Maybe this will be a good year for figs.