

Are We Doing All That We Are Called To Do? (Luke 13:1-9)

You and I, no, let me change that: I enjoy dining on my own self-righteousness.

Three years ago when I preached on this text, there was a fig tree in my back yard. That fig tree is no longer there because I did everything that I could imagine and more over six years to assist it in its growth, but it would not grow. So I ripped it out of the ground and planted a different kind of tree. That new tree is now thriving. Therefore, I'm very sure that the fig tree was at fault for not growing. I was innocent – having done all that I could do.

But this is Lent and Lent calls us to a deeper account and to deeper reflection. Did I really do all that I could have to assist that fig tree in its growth?

We dine well on self-righteousness. But Lent messes with the menu.

Upon reflection about my care of the fig tree, I acknowledge that I never consulted a horticultural expert. I never even went online to determine if there was anything I could do beyond what I was doing – for instance, adding some soil conditioner of some kind. I simply allowed myself to grow increasingly impatient with the tree, until finally, I had had enough.

So did I actually do everything that I could have in the care of the tree? The answer is clearly NO, but in my self-righteousness I justified myself.

The second half of this morning's Gospel text is referred to as the Parable of the Fig Tree. With such an understanding of the text, pastors are likely to preach a sermon about patience and forgiveness based upon the owner's action of granting another year to the tree or to preach upon our calling to bear fruit, identifying us with the tree.

What happens then if neither of these approaches connects to the main point of the parable? Suppose that neither the owner nor the tree is the central figure in the parable. Suppose with me this morning that the gardener is the central figure. And suppose with me a bit more that the fig tree has not produced figs because the gardener has not been doing his job. Then it is the gardener's fault, and not the tree's that it has produced no figs. That's why

the gardener is so anxious to have a chance to do what he have should have been doing all along.

You and I are gardeners. We may not have a garden in our backyard, we may not even have a living plant in our home, but we are gardeners, God's gardeners. When God created the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden it was for the purpose of tilling and keeping the creation. That is our very first calling from the Lord (Genesis 2:15). We are to be stewards of the creation; caring for it in such a way that when we pass it on to the next generation that it is in better condition than when we received it.

But while the whole creation is our garden to care for, we also have individual gardening plots. In Jesus Christ, our calling extends well beyond being stewards of the creation. We are stewards of the mercies of God. Are we cultivating and fertilizing those gifts of God in our own life so that we are producing an abundant crop? Are we so living that others may see the abundance of those gifts in our life? Are we cultivating and fertilizing the lives of children and of our family so that God rejoices over the abundance of the harvest? Or are we sitting back expecting that somehow the harvest will come all on its own?

Our faith is not simply a set of ideas and doctrines; it is a way of life, and it finally expresses itself, or denies itself, in the patterns of everyday living, in the way that we followers of Jesus do such things as raise our children, practice our citizenship, gather at table, show hospitality to the stranger, respond to the pains of the world, treat our employees, manage money, work for justice.

In this Lenten season, we take time to assess our stewardship, our calling, our gardening, if you will. It is easy to self-righteously assert that we have done everything that we could do. Beginning with ourselves, where are the lives that we need to cultivate? Where are the lives that we need to fertilize?

And, of course, do not take the parable too literally. The fertilizer that we need to use is not manure, but love.