

Sunday, April 3, 2022

The Slow Work of God

(Series: "The Gospel According to Peter")
(Message Five)
(Luke 13:6-9)

Message:

Jesus loved to tell stories. As it turned out, he was a very good storyteller.

His stories, as good stories do, prompts our imagination, and takes on a life of their own. We find ourselves, often without even being aware of it, inhabiting the world of the story. Now the storyteller has us right where he wants us...

We find ourselves understanding life from his point of view, seeing ourselves, God, and one another from the inside, from inside the Kingdom of God.

Sadly, the stories are often distilled into a single truth or a moral that's disconnected from people we know, responsibilities we have, and even the storyteller.

Satan loves to get us to discuss and debate ideas about God. He succeeds when we get so enmeshed in the discussion that while we are talking about God, we forget God is actually present to us and the people he calls us to love are right next to us.

All four gospel accounts present Jesus as a storyteller. The **stories** that Jesus told have a style all their own. We call them **parables**. "*Without parables he did not speak to them*" (Matthew 13:34).

A parable is a brief story that Jesus creates (more or less) on the spot as he is talking with people on the road that requires the imaginative participation. The word *parable* literally means "*something thrown down alongside of.*" Our first response is, "What is this doing here, right in front of me?" We ask questions. We think. We imagine. We learn.

A parable is not designed to tell us something new but to get us to notice something we have long **overlooked** even though it has been right in front of us for years. It is also used to get us to take seriously something we have

dismissed as **unimportant** because we have never seen the point of it. Before we know it, we are involved in the story.

A parable keeps the message at a distance, in the shadows. It slows down our comprehension, blocks automatic prejudicial reactions, dismantles stereotypes.

A parable comes up on a listener obliquely; or as Eugene Peterson says, *on a slant*. We listen unsuspectingly. We're caught up in the story. Then, without warning, BAM! We're hit over the head.

Most parables make no explicit reference to God or his kingdom; they are stories about farmers, judges, victims, coins, sheep, and prodigal sons. They're about attending a wedding, building barns and towers, a friend who asks for a loaf of bread after midnight, crooks and beggars, and manure.

Parables were Jesus' language of choice to converse with the people he met. Most of us have a favorite, e.g., the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. This one we're focused on today probably isn't it – but may be when we're done.

Let me introduce it carefully because the NIV plays nice here and obscures much of the meaning of this passage...

Scripture:

"A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. and found none. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" "Sir," the man replied, "Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down." (Luke 13:6-9)

The Greek word translated here as "fertilizer" (*koprion*) is best translated, *manure*. It is not the kind of language we normally use in sermon illustrations, but here, and only here, it is undeniably in the text...and the text is best understood with the proper translation.

The Context

Jesus tells this parable walking from Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

They pass through **Samaria**. Samaria is hostile territory - seven hundred years of bad blood between Jews and Samaritans (like the Hatfields and McCoys). The first night after coming into Samaria, Jesus and his disciples try to find a place to stay for the night. The Samaritans let them know they're not welcome (**Luke 9:54**).

The “thunder brothers” (James and John) are outraged at the **poor welcome** and want to kill them on the spot by calling down **supernatural fire**. It seemed like the natural thing to do - with a solid biblical precedence. (This is the very same place where Elijah had called down fire from heaven to incinerate King Ahaziah’s minions; **2 Kings 1:1-16**). But Jesus was not Elijah. Jesus rebukes the brothers.

In Jesus’ parable, the violent impatience of the farmer’s “**cut it down**” matches the outrage of James and John when confronted with the rude Samaritan inhospitality. The **gardener’s** response, “*Master, don’t touch it this year until I’ve had a chance to dig around it and give it a bit of manure*” sounds like a **Jesus** response.

For some time, Jesus has been telling his followers not to have any illusions that people will receive either him or them with open arms; he has even told them he will be **rejected** and **killed** (**Luke 9:22,44**). We also know, Jesus will face opposition and hostility when he arrives in Jerusalem for the Passover week. In that case, Jesus was killed. **Chopped** down!

Jesus’ reference to a fig tree in a vineyard brings the listener back to the classic vineyard parable in the Old Testament. It is found in Isaiah 5:1-7.

It was not unusual for a fig tree to be found in a vineyard in the Middle East. The fig tree bore fruit about ten months a year (i.e., almost continually); for Hosea, it represented God’s responsive and obedient people (**Hosea 9:10**). The failure to bear fruit symbolized the idolatrous days Hosea lived through (**9:16**).

Newly planted fig trees were given three years to grow and bear fruit. The next three years (4-6) the fruit was considered forbidden (**Leviticus 19:23**). The fruit of the fourth year (the seventh total) was offered to the Lord (**Leviticus 19:24**).

An owner would not come seeking forbidden fruit or fruit that would be offered to the Lord. The story says he’s been waiting three years – so, eight, nine, and ten – long beyond the time of expected fruit bearing. The master is getting impatient; every year is a loss; the situation seems hopeless.

In the Old Testament parable, Isaiah makes clear the owner of the vineyard is **God** and the vineyard itself is the House of Israel (i.e., the **people of God**) (cf. **Luke 20:9**). In Isaiah’s parable, the vineyard is deliberately torn down by the owner; in Jesus’ parable the owner seeks to preserve the health of the vineyard, not destroy it.

God is still the owner in Jesus’ parable, but Jesus makes all the difference.

The prototypical parable in Isaiah 5 offers no grace. It moves quickly from the owner's disappointment to immediate judgement. Not only is the judgement quick, but it is also harsh; it is executed by the owner - termination.

In Jesus' parable, the gardener pleads for **grace** (for **more time**) and mercy (don't dig it out) so he can give it more **attention** - dig around it and spread on manure. The point is clear: acts of redemption are available; time is given for renewal even if the process isn't the most pleasant. The goal remains - fruit bearing!

The fig tree ultimately must respond to its planting and nourishment - as we must respond to God's grace - or judgment will eventually come. But God is slow. Jesus offers grace. The fig tree is given special attention - the gardener/caretaker will dig around it and add manure. Grace! Are our responses defined by **judgement** or **grace**?

Since Christ came and showed us grace, Christ's Church and Christ's disciples must offer grace over judgement. Like Christ, the Church and Christians must be defined by grace.

The Course

Manure is not a quick fix. It has no immediate impact or result. It takes time, sometimes a long time, to see if it will make any difference.

If one wants quick results, chopping down the tree will get it done and give us the fastest opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning. It's just not the Jesus' way.

We love the excitement of beginnings: a new baby, an inauguration, first day on a new job. Manure carries no such exhilaration; it's not dramatic or glamorous. Manure is actually a very slow and smelly solution.

But God is never in a **hurry**. His solutions are not always **well accepted**. We are repeatedly told in Scripture to "*wait for the Lord*." But in a world that promises and demands instant gratification, we seldom do.

When it comes to parables and what is wrong with our world, Jesus uses the tiny, the invisible, the quiet, the slow; he talked about frequently about yeast, salt, seeds and manure.

Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, who endured the violence in two world wars, wrote, "*The greatest temptation of our time is impatience, in its full original meaning: refusal to wait, undergo, suffer. We seem unwilling to pay the price of living with our fellows in creative and profound relationships.*"

We see God as a God who **acts**. We are reminded of "*his wonderful works to the children of men*" (**Psalm 107:31**). But God is also the God who waits: "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.*"

Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). We usually ignore this.

All who follow Jesus must not only put up with his slowness; we must acknowledge its benefit in our own life, and we must imitate it to one another.

Manure does not rank high in the world’s economy. It is refuse; it is garbage. In fact, we organize efficient systems to haul it away, out of sight and smell.

But this despised waste is teeming with microorganisms and the things needed for life: enzymes, minerals, nutrients, energy sources. It is the stuff of **resurrection.**

There are many things we must not do if we are to be faithful to Jesus - like taking things into our own hands or getting rid of the offender along with the offense.

Applying the manure means reentering the conditions of “*Let it be done to me*” (cf. **Luke 1:38**), of **silently submitting** to the things that change death into life, i.e., of **resurrection.**

Language consists of equal parts speaking and silence. Language requires skills in silence as much as in speaking. Most misunderstandings and conflict result from talking that is not embedded in much listening.

Saul Bellow says, “*Silence is enriching. The more you keep your mouth shut, the more fertile you become.*” Silence is the manure of resurrection and reconciliation.

Our prayers are worked into the soil of our lives to shape our obedience, so we live our life congruent with the way God works in us and in our violent world without becoming violent.

Note: Renewal does not come from within (from our own strength) but from **without**; Jesus must act to save the tree: he does what needs to be done in our lives.

Note: Renewal inevitably involves **suffering**, discomfort, **re-orientation.**

But the gardener loves his trees and vines; his love never ends. We can “*Give thanks to the Lord for He is good; his steadfast love endures forever*” (**106:1**).

The Content

Jesus is not a word in a book to merely be read, studied, or discussed. When Jesus took on human form, he lived in a real place (Palestine) in a real time (the first century), and ate real meals with real people (Peter, James, John...).

Jesus' parables have a way of keeping life (and language) real and participatory. They are focused on getting and keeping us alert in acts of justice, loving-kindness, and walking humbly with our God (**Micah 6:8**). They keep us from becoming complacent and drifting into faithlessness. Parables are Jesus' favorite way of letting us in on who he is and what he is doing.

We are used to our leaders motivating and energizing us into action for God and his Kingdom. (This manure story calls us the exact opposite.) It commands us "not to do" something, to stop (in our tracks), to hesitate, to restrain.

This "manure story" is all about being **patient** with God because God is not in a **hurry**; God is never in a hurry. Instead of goading us into action, this parable calls us **out** of the action.

We come across something that offends us, some person who is useless to us or just "taking up valuable space," and like the farmer, we lose patience and either physically or verbally dismiss them: "*Chop him down...Chop her down...Chop it down.*" We often solve kingdom problems by amputation. Get rid of them. Out of sight, out of mind.

The manure story messes up our noisy, aggressive, self-focused, problem-solving **techniques** – our my-way-or-the-highway approach. In a quiet voice, Jesus (the gardener?) says, "*Hold on. Not so fast. Wait a minute. Give me some more time. Let's dig around it and put some manure on this tree.*"

And for his trouble, Jesus was crucified.

This story should also be helpful to us whenever we come up against **animosity**, antagonism, **indignation**, or opposition from others, or within **ourselves**.

Luke records this parable so we pay attention to the response Jesus makes to our strategies of impatience with each other - like "*chop it down*" - by commanding us to "let it alone."

We must apply what we hear in actual neighborhoods, around burgers and beans, in the company of people who know us and whose names we know: spouses, children, friends, and fellow workers – or a good story means nothing.

Days after he tells this story, Jesus enters Jerusalem. By the end of the week, he is hanging on the Golgotha cross. Pilate and Caiaphas, in an unholy alliance, agreed Jesus had to go – **be cut down!**

He was a threat to the precarious peace the Roman army was trying to preserve. He was a threat to the highly profitable business Caiaphas and his Sadducean henchmen were running from the Jerusalem Temple. He was "taking up ground" (**Luke 13:7**) "they" needed for their own purposes. So,

they killed him. They eliminated both him and his kingdom from this earth (or so they thought).

Jesus would respond to their hostile violence while hanging from the **cross** with a word out of this manure **story**. His first words were a prayer: “*Father, forgive them*” (Luke 23:34).

The NIV obscures the connections between this Cross word with his earlier word in this parable. The farmer’s order, “*Cut it down*” (Luke 13:7), is echoed in the Holy Week cry, “*Crucify Him*” (Luke 32:21).

Jesus’ prayer to the Father, “*Forgive them*” (Luke 23:34), is a verbatim repetition of the gardener’s intervention: “*Let it alone*” (Luke 13:8). Exact same word!

In some contexts, Greek word (*aphes*) means, “*Hands off, cool it, leave it alone.*” In contents dealing with sin and guilt, it is translated, “*Forgive...remit...*” It is the same word used in the prayer he taught us to **pray**: “*Forgive us our sins...*” (Luke 11:4).

Here, the contexts of **parable** and **prayer** converge. The farmer’s impatient “*Cut it down*” is deflected by the gardener’s “*Let it alone.*” The violence visited on Jesus is countered by his prayer, “*Father, forgive them.*”

Our prayer, “*Forgive us our sins...*” commits us to respond as Jesus: **slowly**, hesitantly, **graciously**. (And Scripture reminds us repeatedly, how we respond to him, and others is how he and they will respond to us).

For those of us who are up to our necks in manure (i.e., up to our necks in forgiveness), it is important to note that the forgiveness Jesus prayed for us is not preceded by any confession or acknowledgement of wrongdoing by the crucifixion crowd—or by any of us since.

Preemptive forgiveness. Jesus prays we be forgiven **before** any of us have any idea we even know we **need** it, “*for they do not know what they do*” (Luke 23:34). No **preconditions**. Just **amazing grace**.

Dr. Douglas Kamstra
Covenant CRC
7171 Willard Ave. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49548