

Reckless Self-Forgetfulness: Bearing Fruit or Just Taking Up Space?

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Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Texts: Isaiah 58:6-p; Luke 13:6-9

From one cover to the other, the Bible reminds us that God's people depended on the land to survive. You might say it started with Adam, whose name in Hebrew translates as "dirt-man." Esau was said to have "smelled of the field." Wells and fields defined wealth and power, not stocks and bonds. The wealthy extended charity by allowing the poor to glean the fields, taking whatever was left over after the primary harvest.

In the New Testament, Jesus framed some of his most memorable parables in agricultural terms – the parable of the sower, the wheat and the chaff and the mustard seed. We read that God is the vinedresser and that both Jesus and those who follow him the vine. Paul writes of reaping and sowing, James of the farmer patiently waiting on the rain. From labor to the marketplace to international trade , agriculture shaped the entire Biblical economy.

In our increasingly urban times, economic output springs forth more from digits than dirt. Millions of children never set foot on a real farm. That's a shame. We can learn a lot about life and faith from working with the land. This morning, Jesus gives us a story that encourages us to think about how we can serve our God in the fields, so to speak, that stretch beyond the front doors of our homes and our church.

Jesus tells his followers a parable about a man who planted a fig tree. He gave the tree three years to produce fruit. When it didn't, the man told the gardener to cut the tree down.

Perhaps the vineyard owner had a point. Either the tree produced or he would replace it with one that would. No need for an unproductive tree just taking up space. The gardener, however, saw things differently. He saw potential in the fig tree.

"Give me a year to work with the tree," he told the vineyard owner. "Let me dig around it. Let me go get some manure to put on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good. If not, you can cut it down."

As with other parables, we don't know how the story ends. That's the thing about parables. They suggest new ways, new direction for how things might turn out with God.

They poke us and prod us, but they don't hand feed us the final answer. The Bible is a book of faith, after all, not a set of operating instructions that produce automatic outcomes.

So, we don't know what becomes of the fig tree. Or the landowner. As with each of us, this story is open-ended. But what does seem to stick with us is that gardener. He didn't give up hope on the tree. He intended to give it a second chance ... with a different approach ... and then see what the tree could do. The gardener saw the potential for transformation, from a tree that was just taking up space to one that could bear fruit for the Kingdom.

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That tree might represent me. It might represent you. We're nothing without the care and provision of our Lord, our Master Gardener. God knows when we need help. God knows how to loosen the soil that our roots might grow a bit deeper, that we might become a bit stronger. God also knows when we need some special nutrients to enrich our life and faith. That may be rest. It may be a new church family. It may be scripture. It may be a recommitment to prayer, as with those here who are participating in our intentional prayer ministries in these weeks of Lent. Or it may be a new perspective or direction in life.

This story might also be about God's church. Last week we began a series of sermons that sets up a season of discernment, discussion and dreaming about what comes next for Caldwell. We took account of the how God's church at large has ebbed and flowed, formed and reformed through centuries of change in society and in the surrounding culture. We took stock of how familiar denominations once dominated the social and religious landscape in America. We acknowledged, at the same time, that those "mainline denominations" now sit closer to the outside of American life than the comfortable insider position they once held.

The religious landscape in America is shifting and surging. As with our earth's outer core, we're witnessing the activity of religious plate tectonics. Societal trends and developments are rubbing and scraping along the edges. New mountains and valleys of religious life are being created before our very eyes. As I have mentioned to you before, author Phyllis Tickle posits that the church goes through massive reformation about every 500 years. We are, she says, smack dab in the middle of one of those eras of transformation. So, friends, grab hold of something as there may be a few bumps on the way.

Last week I shared the constructive criticism of some scholars and observers that the church at large has done too much hunkering down and not enough rising above. Too often, the church focused more on maintenance than mission, more on survival than taking risk. We've turned inward rather than outward. When Jesus said "Go," we decided instead to "stay," as in stay where we are, too often trying the same old formulas, all variations of a "build-it-and-they-will-come" model of church buildings full of introverted programs for ourselves rather self-giving ministry and sacrifice for those on the outside. Meanwhile, however, the mainline denominations experienced dramatic declines in membership and vitality.

After that sermon I invited your feedback. Several of you weighed in and I am so grateful. One of you said I was just "meddling" in the church's business ... and that I or we should keep it up, keep "meddling." Another member said "I like where we are going and think it is the right thing, but it is scary!" He's right. It is scary.

But the question stands for the church at large just as it did for the fig tree in Jesus parable: Are we going to produce fruit for the Kingdom of God? Or are we just taking up space? In Jesus' story, the gardener intervened before the landowner cut the tree down. The gardener dug around the base of the tree to free its roots for growth in new directions. The gardener went out and found the kind of nutrients the tree needed for new life. In the parable, the gardener was going to find some manure in particular.

If we consider the fig tree to be God's church, we might ask: What kinds of nutrients does the church need for new life? In response to that question, we're studying what it means to be a missional church. After last week's sermon, I realize that some might think this is all just a bunch of B.S. But others think that this missional manure is just what God's church needs.

So, what does it mean? After reading last Sunday's sermon one of you summarized it well. To be missional, he wrote, is to understand that God's work in the church is "through us, not about us." Being missional, he said is to understand that "We will do more good saying hello to strangers than holding hands with our friends." Finally, he offered this rally cry: "Let's grow out, not whither in."

Amen?

We recognize that this is a journey we've already begun in some ways here at Caldwell. Now we are just learning to navigate it more naturally, hopefully a bit more instinctively. It's also a journey that cannot forsake our need to build meaningful relationships within the congregation even while we are reaching out to others. As one member wrote to

me, we risk lacking integrity if we do ministry that crosses boundaries outside the congregation but doesn't, at the same time, locate meaningful common ground within.

Be reassured that we won't "get" this overnight or through a few sermons. We've begun to offer resources for further discernment about all of this on our website. Go to our homepage at Caldwellpresby.org and look on the right side for a button titled "Caldwell in 3D." There you can view some brief videos of others talking about the missional church. We will add to that over time and soon be gathering in small groups to discuss what it means for us at Caldwell.

In the meantime, we can all think and pray about how we can, as the gardener says, "dig around" the base of God's church here at Fifth and Park. A good gardener knows that proper cultivation involves bringing in elements that aren't naturally present in the soil. That's how you spark new life.

What might that mean for us and our cultivation as God's servants? We already serve others in hands-on ways across multiple ministries. Perhaps new cultivation includes becoming more comfortable as agents of social justice. For example:

A new study released last week took the deepest look yet at the wealth gap between black and white. It concluded that, from 1984 to 2009, the black middle class expanded, black college graduation rates tripled, and black elected officials moved into a broad range of public offices, including the presidency.

That's not all the report found, however. In the same period, the wealth gap between whites and blacks nearly tripled among those in the study. The median net worth of whites in the study was \$265,000 in 2009, compared with \$28,500 for blacks. Blacks continue to face less economic opportunity. Their homes don't increase in value as much as in white neighborhoods, and, too often, financial institutions guided blacks into subprime and other high-cost financing options. All according to the Washington Post.¹

"The racial wealth gap is the civil rights agenda for the 21st century," said Thomas M. Shapiro, the report's lead author. "It is a concrete way of assessing where we are as a society when it comes to racial justice."

To be sure, these disparities reflect complex and systemic imbalances in government, politics, the economy and society. Tackling those issues may sound awfully intimidating. The question, however, remains: As people of God, what do we do with facts like that?

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/study-ties-black-white-wealth-gap-to-stubborn-disparities-in-real-estate/2013/02/26/8b4b3f50-8035-11e2-b99e-6baf4ebe42df_story.html. (Feb. 27, 2013)

We serve a God who calls for justice to roll down like thunder, even if it means challenging powers and principalities. How does knowledge like that study help cultivate our response to who Jesus was as prophet, priest and king? It may be the racial wealth gap, attacks on Medicaid, branding immigrants with pink drivers' licenses or our city's failures in affordable housing. The question stands: How do we mix these realities into our own soil so that God's church works more effectively for the establishment of God's just, equal and peaceful kingdom for all races, creeds and colors?

Are we bearing fruit? Or just taking up space?

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Friends, in closing, we are reminded that we are in the season of Lent. The cross that is our destination in these 40 days is the second chance we've all been given. In Jesus' parable, the gardener tended the fig tree after giving it a second chance. But he also expected new fruit. That's what God expects of us ... as we live continually into the call of our mission statement to be a "meaningful, transformative community."

In the name of God the creator, redeemer and sustainer, Amen.