

“Holy Fertilizer”

Some of you may know that I once worked in gourmet food and wine retail. It was an interesting business and I learned a lot about how various foods were grown or made. In fact, in those days I gave classes and tasting of mustards, olive oils, vinegars, beer and wine. I particularly enjoyed studying and learning about viticulture; the growing of grapes and the processes for producing wine. One of the rules in wine growing was that it takes three years for new vines to start producing usable grapes. Younger vines might produce but they do not have the root structure and maturity to produce grapes that are worthy of quality wine. This seems to hold true for other fruit bearing vines and trees such as the fig tree in today’s parable.

This fig tree is three years old and it has yet to bear a single fig. The owner tells his gardener to cut it down. With the unstated idea of replacing it with another tree that might bear fruit in this valuable soil. The gardener requests one more year to tend it and fertilize it with manure. He says to the owner, “If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” That’s the end of the parable.

Jesus tells this parable in response to those who questioned him about people who had a terrible death. Pilate had them killed and mingled their blood with the Temple sacrifice. It would be like someone killing a few of us and putting our blood into the communion wine. The wine even if it had been consecrated would now be fouled. Not only would we not use it, but the action was blasphemous as human sacrifice was not condoned. Even from as early in the Bible as Genesis, when Cain kills Abel the ground cries out because human blood has been shed.

Jesus adds an incident of eighteen people who died when a tower fell on them. That is he adds an example of accidental death to the horrendous murder by Pilate. His point was that these people did not die gruesome deaths as punishment for some horrible sin. Rather as the bumper sticker used to read, “Stuff happens,” and because stuff happens we need to be prepared.

Preparation in this instance is repentance. Not just a one-time turning around but rather our constant need for repentance. Not so much a breast beating “Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa” but an awareness of ourselves and how we fail. That awareness is a challenge to us to live full and godly lives. As Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” If we are not paying attention to our actions and the results thereof we are going through life like a bull in a china shop or a blundering fool. We wreak havoc wherever we go and blithely continue our actions without regard for how it impacts others or the world.

However, I think there is more to this parable than the idea of repentance. After all, a fig tree might disappoint a gardener with its lack of fruit, but it is unlikely to sin or to repent for sinning. If we read this parable in conjunction with the story from today’s reading from Exodus we might get another idea of what the parable is speaking to.

Moses is the starring character in Exodus. We hear about his birth to Hebrew parents. Pharaoh had condemned to death all newborn male children of the captive

Hebrews. Through the skill of Shiphrah and Puah¹ and by the cleverness of Moses' sister he ends up being reared in Pharaoh's household.² As he grew older he began to identify with the enslaved Hebrews. This eventually led to his killing an Egyptian overseer who was mistreating one of the Hebrew slaves. Fearing for his life Moses fled Egypt and settled in the land of Midian. There he became a shepherd for a man named Jethro whose daughter he married.

One might say that Moses had begun to lead an examined life, but the results scared him so badly that he fled. While he settles for the life of a shepherd, God felt that Moses had more to give than that. God calls Moses to be the leader of God's chosen people. Moses would take them out of slavery in Egypt and bring lead them on a journey to a new land, the Promised Land of milk and honey, the land of Canaan.

In today's segment from Exodus, Moses encounters a burning bush. First I wonder how many times Moses in his desire to live ignorant of his calling passed by the bush before he recognized that it was burning? Was this the first time or had he walked that path many times ignoring or blind to its flames. When it finally does catch his eye and the encounter with God who speaks from the bush transforms Moses. It is as if he had been the fruitless fig tree of the parable. The encounter with YHWH speaking from the bush had broken up his soil and fertilized him. He was now to begin bearing fruit. An aimless shepherd hiding from the world having had a fire lit under him, so to speak, becomes the inspired and fearless leader of his people.

God works like that throughout the Bible. But it is not just in the Bible that God works that way. God's care for each of us is boundless. God works with each of us much as the gardener did. Some of us take many years to bear fruit and others it might happen overnight. The timing is not as important as the result.

God looks at each of us as the gardener looked at the fig tree, not as something to pluck up and burn, but as something that just needs the right fertilizer and a little care. I have to think that when Charles Schulz, cartoonist and devoted Christian, wrote "A Charlie Brown Christmas"³ he had this parable in mind. Near the end of the film the ever optimistic Linus looks at the fragile and twiggy little tree that Charlie Brown picked out and he feels affection for it. He wraps his blanket around the tree's base and says, "I never thought it was such a bad little tree. It's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love."

Gardener, Linus or burning bush the love God comes to us in the form we need. There is no time like the present to accept God's love for you and grow into the fullness of your life. Accept God's love and use it to bear fruit that the world hungers for. Bear the fruit of love and justice in the name of God.

¹ Two Hebrew midwives who were instructed to kill Jewish male children by Pharaoh but refused. They used a clever ruse that played on Egyptian stereotypes of the Jews. Exodus 1:15-21.

² Exodus 2:1-10

³ "A Charlie Brown Christmas" written by Charles M. Schulz, directed by Lee Melendez, Produced by Lee Mendelson ©1965