

“Giving It Another Year”  
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The consensus today is that we should sound a bit of a warning before we read a parable, especially those we think we already know what the parable means and may ask of us. The working assumption is that if we get too familiar with a parable, well, it tends to lose its edge and ability to surprise and awaken us. Where’s the edge, where’s the provocation in today’s parable? Well, it sounds like Jesus is poking at our lingering suspicion that most people get what they deserve. The poor have so little because they are so lazy. The unsuccessful don’t try hard enough. Those who are unlucky at love or always sick don’t take care of themselves. But Jesus says, “Well, you never know.” He suggests that when and how we die are not the results of God punishing us for our sins and failures. And then he says a surprising thing: But, “repent,” nevertheless. Repent? The word is *metanoia*, which is translated “turn around.” Turn around? Yes, turn around, Jesus says, like a careful gardener works with the roots in the hopes of saving one more tree. Turn and work the soil, get into the core of the issue, and figure out the appropriate amount of fertilizer that needs to be applied.

I looked at a couple of YouTube videos this week that actually featured people working with fig trees. A tree with too deep roots as well as one with too shallow roots will need turning, as will a tree that is overexposed or underexposed. A tree may need turning if it struggles to pollinate, which quite literally has something to do with “the birds and the bees,” if you know what I mean. *Metanoia* results in metamorphosis (*meta* – “after” or “beyond” + *morphe* – “essential form”). Everything in nature and us is all about conversion. Conversion is the turning at the core that results in transformation of and from the core. All nature, and we ourselves, are so made.

“Let’s give it another year,” says the gardener. It will not be a waste of time or soil. Let’s turn it and watch it mature toward producing the figs it wants to bear. Or as May Sarton puts it: “Let’s live as close as possible to all that leaves the door open to the ‘holy’.... Please, do not “sink into apathy.” It is the gardener who knows that “every flower holds the whole mystery in its short cycle.” (*Journal of a Solitude*)

And this is what we hear in the reading from Isaiah, the prophet. “Call upon the Lord while he is near,” keep turning toward God, the Source from whom all good things flow. If we keep turning, it will be like finding water, wine, milk and bread that alone will satisfy. And turning will activate what all the money in the world can never do. It isn’t about shopping for a better price but making sure we have the right supplier.

This is why Isaiah, speaking for God, asks: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” If turning leads to transformation, we need to be prayerful about to whom and to what we are turning. In a reflection I read this week, Emily C. Heath shared that she has made a habit of teaching the young people in her church that they should never give the best of themselves to someone or something that can never love them back. Isn’t that a marvelous statement? And a haunting one, I think. Heath believes that idolatry, something we seldom talk about, seems to be flourishing in our modern-day culture. She writes: “We have not yet started building literal golden calves, but we all have spent plenty of time worshiping at equally dangerous altars. Money, success, popularity, greatness, security – these are powerful gods. And in

worshipping them, we have too often driven ourselves to the point of living overwhelming lives.” (“Living By the Word,” *The Christian Century*, February 17, 2016)

Heath refers to a statement she found in the book *Overwhelmed*, that claims that the average high school kid today experiences the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient of the 1950s. (*Overwhelmed*, Brigid Schulte) I can’t attest to the accuracy of that statement, but I’m almost sure that the comparison is meant to be provocative and move us into action. And not just therapists, but all of us. We can feel overwhelmed these days, but as we relearn how to turn around, we can encourage others to turn around, to look deeply and carefully into the inner core from which turning results in transformation – *metanoia* and *metamorphosis*. I know that this may be awkward at first, to do our own deep turning, and even more awkward to encourage others to do theirs. But at the core of turning around, of true repentance, lies hope. Why not give it another year? Why not give ourselves to the turning, and find the added nutrients we need?

There is an echo of this in what Brian McLaren invited his readers to do last week. Several of us here at FUMC read *We Make the Road by Walking* a couple of years ago, but Bishop Elaine and many throughout our annual conference are reading it now. Based on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5 (17-48), McLaren hears Jesus inviting us to work preemptively, as in pro-actively, in the hopes that we learn to get in front of the inevitable cycles that play out in our everyday relationships. “True aliveness,” he writes, “won’t come through unthinking conformity to tradition...and it won’t come from simply defying tradition. To be alive, we must “discern and fulfill the highest intent of tradition – even if doing so means breaking with the details of tradition in the process.” (Page 131)

Here, then, is our take-home assignment for week three of our Lenten journey. Preemptive repentance, proactive turning around, takes us to our roots, our core, our home, which is God, the One who bids us “Give it another year, and see what happens!” And instead of always asking “Why” questions, which is where today’s reading begins – Why do bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people-type questions, let’s spend more time asking this question: In what ways are we like the fig tree? Where are we un-enlivened, un-nourished, unable or unwilling to nourish others? Can we, will we consent to change, and allow nutrients to extend our lives? Perhaps an even better question to ask this new week is this: In what ways are we like the gardener? Debie Thomas in her blog asked: “Am I willing to accept Jesus’s invitation to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure? Where do I see life, where others see death? How willing are we to pour hope into a project we can’t control?”

While we were with family in West Seattle the last few days, I got a strong sense that I should drive over to St. Peter’s in Bellevue, for exactly what I didn’t really know; I hadn’t driven by since 2015, I suspect. But I did on Friday, and I looked at the community garden that Dick Spady (of Dick’s Drive-in) helped us build; I also checked out the Pod next to one of the Fellowship Hall doors, the container where mattresses are stored during the day for the women and children who sleep on them at night. And I also noticed the same door with the same rust that still needs replaced. But while walking around to the front of the church, I discovered why I was called back to St. Peter’s. To visit a tree, a Prairie Fire Crabtree, that Cameron and I planted in 2012 in memory of his dad, Richard Walter Clark, former Assistant Superintendent of Bellevue Schools, and lay leader at St. Peter’s at

the time of his death, who helped me find my way from the school world back into the local church. Boy, I'm sure glad someone decided to give that tree another year; it's a great looking tree.