

In the Muck

Cynthia Lapp

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Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13: 1-19

When scripture baffles me, I look for help. Lately 8-year-old Elijah has been offering his help when I work on sermons. He likes to sit next to me at the computer and give me hints about word choice and images. When I read him this passage from Luke last week, he looked as bewildered as I felt. After much persistence, I finally found meaning in the manure in verse 8. But let's not jump right in it, let's start at the beginning.

Luke 13 follows a series of warnings that Jesus is giving to the large crowds that follow him. The people are warned to be ready, they are to be watchful. Jesus notifies the people that he comes not to bring peace but division, even among those in the same household. He tells them to pay attention to the inconsistencies they observe, to make their own judgments about what is right and wrong and take care of things before it gets too late.

In response to Jesus' warnings about preparedness and judgment, several people step forward to offer two case studies to Jesus: the first is the horrible story of the Galileans who Pilate had presumably killed while they were in the temple offering sacrifices. The second — 18 people died when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Try as they might, scholars cannot verify these events historically. And what in the world does all this mean? Let's try it another way.

“At that very time some people came to tell Jesus about the congregation in New Orleans that was swept away by the hurricane because the government had not provided an adequate levy system. Jesus said, “Do you think that because that congregation suffered and died they are worse sinners than other people? I thought not. Of course they are not worse sinners. But unless you change the way you take care of the environment, you will die just as they did. Or what about those people that died when the bridge collapsed in Minneapolis? Was it their fault, Were they more sinful than everyone else? Of course not. But unless you repent, you will suffer the same fate.”

Jesus is using the disasters of the day to illustrate — to emphatically emphasize — that God doesn't cause tragedies as punishment for sin, which is no excuse to live a sinful life. People may be sinful but that does not mean that God makes bad things happen to them. Jesus is quite clear about this, but people still preach and believe today that God does make bad things happen to innocent people. We can count on Pat Robertson to blame almost every natural and human-induced disaster on gays and lesbians. The earthquake in Haiti, Robertson claims, was a result of the Haitian peoples' pact with the devil 200 years ago. I haven't yet heard his explanation for the earthquake in Chile.

Though televangelists would have us believe that God is vengeful, Jesus tells us otherwise. But Jesus also says God's mercy is no justification for living capriciously. Make something good come out of the tragedy; take the opportunity to turn around and live right.

The parable that Jesus tells next is perhaps more clear. A vineyard owner had planted a fig tree in her vineyard. She came to pick figs, but she found that there were none on the tree. The owner says to her gardener, "Would you look at this? I planted this tree years ago and for three years I have been coming to pick fruit from it. It never bears figs. What a waste of space. This is a small vineyard; I don't have room for plants that don't produce fruit. I need trees that will produce and help sustain my family. Chop this fig tree down."

While this biblical landowner has been having trouble with her tree, apparently fig trees are fairly easy to grow. I was amazed to find this unsolicited email exchange in my inbox this week:

My neighbor Joe writes: I want to spread fig trees around the area and just wanted to know if it is as simple as it looks below.

"In the spring before the tree leafs out, cut a 12 inch long piece of branch up to 3/4 of an inch thick. Bury it all except the last bud on top. It will root itself quite easily and grow vigorously throughout the summer."

Neighbor Alan responds: I have had better results from covering a low branch with earth and letting it root while still attached to the tree. They do grow fast.

Next door Nathan chimes in: My mom has two fig trees in Silver Spring that did nothing for three years. We thought they might be dying. Then they took off and four years later are now gigantic fruit-bearing monsters.

This is no joke. Here is the parable come to life. The fig tree is easy and fast growing according to Alan. But Nathan's mom had to wait seven years for

her fig trees to become “gigantic fruit-bearing monsters.” It took so long she thought the trees might be dead. I don’t know if she was thinking of doing the biblical thing and chopping down the tree. In the parable, the vineyard owner loses patience. She does not have time or space to give to an unfruitful tree. She tells the gardener to cut the tree down.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible the vineyard and fig tree are symbols for Israel. Jesus continues using this symbolism in his own teaching. Here we have a fig tree, planted in a vineyard, and the tree does not produce fruit. This is quite an indictment: an unfruitful tree in the vineyard. The vineyard owner is not pleased.

But the gardener pleads on behalf of the tree. “Please, let me try once more to get it to bear fruit. This time I will dig around the roots, put fertilizer on it. Give it one more year. If it bears fruit next year, great. If not, then we can cut it down.”

The NIV translation says the gardener offers “fertilizer.” The NRSV says “manure.” Whatever it was, it wasn’t nice and neat, dumped out of the bag like we buy at Hyattsville Nursery for our plants. Jesus’ gardener had to haul sheep dip from the field or donkey do from the meadow. The wheelbarrow and shovel probably weren’t all that ergonomically correct either. I imagine the whole procedure was pretty sticky and stinky.

Still, the gardener begs for a chance to get into the muck for this one little tree: this tree that has been growing for years and has never done well at all. Maybe the gardener is a soft touch for anything with roots and shoots. Or like in

“A Charlie Brown Christmas,” he sees potential in the little tree. In any case, the gardener is willing to get into the smelly manure in order to help the tree produce figs.

I love a good metaphor and this one is tempting. I can think of all kinds of fruitless trees. All those barren trees need is a good dose of skat to get them producing. And everyone knows that in DC we have enough metaphorical manure to grow bushels of fruit.

But metaphors are not always safe. Who is the vineyard owner? Who or what is the tree? The manure? Who is the gardener?

No matter who is what in this story, someone has to be willing to get dirty for the fruit to have a chance to grow. Someone has to be willing to do the hard work of slogging to the sheep pasture and hauling the sheep dip, digging deep around the tree, loosening the roots, dumping the manure in, mucking it around and then covering it all back up again so there is new growth.

Just as the NIV wants to change manure into fertilizer, it is easy to imagine that growth can be clean and easy. If we just cut the stick at the right time of the year and follow the directions, like I received from my friend, Joe, then the tree ought to grow. In no time we will be eating figs, making Fig Newtons and sharing figgy pudding.

But this tree is not bearing fruit. We could do nothing; that has its own consequences. We might choose to watch it for one more year, observing analytically and gathering data. But even this approach is not without its risk. Jesus says there is possibility of judgment.

Jesus also says there is the danger of grace. The best hope seems to be to get down in the dirt. It is not enough to bring a load of the smelly stuff near the orchard. It has to be unloaded onto the tree roots. Watching it sit on top isn't enough either. We need to dig down in, take the risk to get dirty, maybe even disturb the roots so that the richness of the "product" gets right in there and can do its stuff, giving the nourishment that is needed.

In Isaiah 55 we read, and this morning we sang, "Let all who are thirsty come, let all who are hungry come." This is no small invitation. This week we welcome some 25 guests to live in the fellowship hall. Some of the families in the Warm Nights program may have given up on themselves; they may think God has given up on them. They may feel as if they are not bearing fruit, are close to being cut down.

We might insert any number of fruitless trees into this parable: Renewed war in Afghanistan. Healthcare reform. Family disputes. Personal addictions. Theological disagreements. Name your own figless tree.

We will be in the vineyard this week. What will we see? What will we experience? I wonder, who is the vineyard owner? What is the tree? Who is the gardener? The manure? Will we get into the muck, get our fingernails filthy, get our clothes crudy? Will we find ourselves picking fruit? Producing fruit?

In this season of holding on and letting go, what would it look like to go to bat for a struggling tree, *letting go* of the need to keep our hands and clothes clean? What would it look like to *let go* of the notion that we can bear fruit without the hard work of mucking around the roots? What would it look like to *hold onto*

hope that the fig tree might actually bear fruit some day, if we give it one more chance?

May God grant us grace to work in the vineyard, one more day, one more week. One more year.