

Covenant Presbyterian Church

“Ask Again Later” Habakkuk 3:17-19; Luke 13:7-9

Jeff Fox-Kline August 11, 2019

We continue our sermon series on the parables of Jesus. I've been thrilled with this series, I've loved reading the stories that Jesus told, and hearing the ways that we can think of them. I love the parables, the surprise, the confusion, the multitude of interpretations. Today we're coming to one of the very brief parables that Jesus tells. I think we're conditioned to think of parables as these long narratives filled with twists and turns. We think of the parable of the good Samaritan, with its three act story structure. We think of the story of the prodigal son which is the story of a young man's journey. But sometimes parables are short little stories, hardly stories at all. The parable of the yeast is pretty much just “the kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with flour”. Sure, it's theologically dense, but I wouldn't call it a particularly compelling narrative. Today, we're reading one of those little ones. Three verses, one parable, less than 100 words. Listen for the words of Jesus

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Figs were harvested late in the season. By the time the fig tree was ready for harvest the grapes had been picked and the vines had been cut back. By this time in the season the field would be looking bare and sparse, except for the fig trees, with their green foliage standing out. But just because there were leaves did not

mean that there was fruit; and that's the situation of the fig tree that Jesus told us of in this parable. This poor tree had gone three full years without producing fruit. Land was at a premium, and the smart thing to do with a defective tree was to start over. Cut it down and plant a new one. I love the phrase that Jesus has the landowner use "Why should it be wasting the soil?"

Hard words for the tree, especially because this comes right after a conversation about repentance. In light of this, then the parable's meaning starts to take shape. Traditional interpretation states that we humans are the tree who has born no fruit. The wrath of God is come for us, but the gardener intercedes on our behalf. Jesus, who stands in says let me tend to this tree, let it bear fruit and spare your wrath for the time. But in this interpretation, there is still an urgency born of the need for repentance. In his commentary on Luke, the scholar Allen Culpepper says that Jesus "asks them to identify with the fig tree that is given one last chance... you have one last chance to put things right before the judgment". He continues this interpretation by saying "You have but a short time to prepare for the judgment...if you do not use the time that remains you will be ...cut down like the fig tree. No more forceful series of warnings could be given." Jesus the gardener, God's people the garden, God as the landowner – these are all familiar images that echo throughout the history of the Bible.

One of my favorite things about parables are the ways they allow for continued interpretation. By teaching lessons, by telling stories, Jesus encourages us to think actively about the range and depth of possibilities in his story. I think it's important for us to learn the classic interpretation of the parable, but the most fun thing for me to do is try to look at it in new ways to find what it may mean to us. One thing I find valuable is this parable's lack of an actual ending. Because it is so short, it can be easy to forget that this is also a story. Listen to how it ends, "If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down". That's

not an ending, it's an ellipsis. If we're looking for a full story, I would hope there would be an epilogue showing the fruit growing on the fig tree, a satisfied gardener, freeze frame, roll credits. Frankly, I'd be satisfied if we could actually hear what the landowner's response is. But that's not what we have. We have a request and no answer.

But the request of the gardener, his hope for future fruit, recalls the words of the prophet Habakkuk, words that were read earlier. "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights".

Though the fig tree does not blossom, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Powerful words to close out that brief book in the Old Testament. But to pick up solely on this passage from the book is to miss on how the book starts with this cry of lament "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.⁴ So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted".

To read the final song of praise and to miss the opening of lament is to place the prophet in the realm of naivety, hoping against reality, ignoring the suffering that is so keenly felt amongst the people.

It feels as if we're in a Habakkuk moment. How long shall I cry for help? This is the refrain that I've been feeling throughout this past week as we've sat in the grief of yet another spate of atrocities. As people have been killed by violent

terrorists seeking to target people based on their race and country of origin in the case of El Paso. And in Dayton, as people have been killed for reasons that are currently inscrutable. “Or cry to you ‘violence!’ and you will not save?” For some, that lament is the place they find themselves. And I want to affirm that lament is appropriate, it is good, it is biblical. For some, to seek hope is to move too fast past the realities of evil in this world, glossing over the pain that is deeply felt. To the people currently in the depths of lament, I want to say to you, stay there for the time you need. Habakkuk speaks to you in that lament.

But Habakkuk also speaks of hope. Even in desolation, even though the fig tree does not blossom, the prophet finds hope and strength in God. I can appreciate that. I can appreciate hope. I value hope. But even beyond sharing the fig tree, I think Habakkuk needs to be read alongside the parable in Luke. In both, the fig tree is barren of fruit, and in both there is a hope of future fruitfulness. However, in the parable the gardener petitions more time for the tree by saying this “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it”. The hope of the future is paired with concrete steps to help bring the tree to blossom. To me, that is where I am finding hope in this moment. Hope is not just asking for the extra year and then waiting it out. Hope is not identifying a problem and counting on it going away. Thoughts and prayers will not be sufficient to bring the tree to blossom, as any gardener would tell you. When I think about what happened in Gilroy, and El Paso, and Dayton, I think about the fact that this is not how things should be. My hope is that one day this level of violence and hatred will go away, but I know that tree will not blossom unless something is done to tend to the root of the problem. But these problems are multifaceted and there is no guarantee of success. Some possible solutions arise, but no certainty that we will come across the right solution. One solution could be preventing the people who would commit these crimes from obtaining the kinds of weapons that

allow the carnage to reach the level we've seen recently. One solution could be providing easier, less stigmatized access to mental health services for people who are prone to violence. One solution could be reacquainting ourselves with kindness and compassion, reaching out to lonely and hurting people. One solution could be working to counter white nationalist and supremacist ideologies that lead to violence targeting vulnerable people.

Are any of these solutions going to solve the problem entirely? No. But should any of these options bear fruit, then we can validate the hope we have in the future. To express our hope in the fruitfulness of the future, we need to actually do something. Whatever it is that you feel that you can do – do it. Do it. Find ways to make the world better, because it won't get better through empty hope in some nebulous future.

Ellen Ott Marshall, wrote a book entitled "Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom" about Christian hope using the prophet Habakkuk as her guiding scripture. In the first chapter she says "Held together, this opening shout and the closing resolve comprise a text of hope because they illustrate the work that hope requires, responding to violence and determining to stand fast in its wake". She differentiates hope and optimism, with hope being a practice that requires cultivation and attention to the world around us. In this light, we hope by doing.

And this is not just applicable to national tragedies, but also to every day of our lives. If our hope in our lives is to maintain our health, it is not enough to just assume as you age your health will improve – you need to improve your diet and exercise. If your hope is to improve your marriage, it is not enough to just hope that things will get better – you need to improve communication, spend time together, address issues. If your hope is to strengthen your friendships, you can't just hope for it – you need to make space, find the time for cultivating the

relationship, show them you care. Whatever your hope is, you need work to bear out that hope, because hoping alone won't affect real change.

The landowner's reprieve for the fig tree is reason for hope. Not vain hope, or empty optimism, but hope that through diligent care, pruning and fertilizing that the tree will bear fruit. I have hope for us. I have hope for this world. But I know that my hope is vain if I don't dedicate myself to making this hope a reality. I know that hope can be dangerous if it leads to complacency. I know that there are people too tired to hope right now and I can't stress enough how important it is not to pretend at an unfelt hope – rest and allow yourself some time for healing. I also know that hope can be the motivating force to allow for justice, to allow for change, to allow the whole world to come to fruition. Though the fig tree does not blossom, I have hope that we can someday nurture it to health, to bear good fruit for everyone to enjoy.