

Third Sunday in Lent

“HOLY CRAP!” (OR IF YOU PREFER, “THE TENDER GARDENER”)

Luke 13:1-9

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Analysis by James Squire

1At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” 6Then 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. 7So 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?’ 8He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

DIAGNOSIS: Obstinate Trees

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Poisoning the Vineyard*

We are the fig trees planted in God's vineyard, and God is tired of waiting for us to bear fruit (vv. 6-7). Whatever "three years" really means, it is clear that the owner views it as "plenty long enough" for bearing fruit. For God it has certainly been "plenty long enough." In fact, we don't seem to be bearing fruit so much as the opposite—"wasting the soil" (v. 7). Our existence in the vineyard is fouling it, rather than enriching it. The Pilate's of the world do their own part in the destruction (v. 2), and the infrastructure is fragile (v. 4) – to say nothing of nature itself. But we perpetuate the destruction figuratively by our obsession with the judicial state of those who suffer calamities (vv. 2, 4). Were they Christian believers? Our more flamboyant evangelists ask those around them, "If God were to take you this night, do you know if you will go to heaven?" Most of us are too cultured for such brashness, but we probably buy into that sentiment all the same. Instead of participating in the healing of the world, we rush to the blame game, contributing to a culture of death rather than life.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Wasting the Soil*

The disciples talked about Galilean sins, but Jesus pushes deeper to the issue of repentance – and our repentance, not that of "others" (v. 3). In a world now perpetually plagued by terrorism on top of all the other problems we face, we desire our own repentance is less and less. Our obsession, as well as our destructive behavior in the vineyard, stems from our opposition to the intent of God for our lives. We were planted in this vineyard to bear fruit, but instead we choose to oppose the plans of our Planter. We are not just fruitless trees, we are obstinate trees. It does not appear that we will ever be a blessing to the vineyard. Instead we drink of the moisture of the soil and yield nothing in return. A tree may come by this result "naturally," but we do it willfully. Our will does not

belong to the life-giving Creator of the vineyard, but rather to the death-dealing serpent of the garden, and our actions wreak the corresponding havoc on the vineyard of this world.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Cut Down

Maybe the owner of the vineyard is right (v. 7): “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?” We are taking up space, and wasting the soil. The owner may decide to save his vineyard by having us destroyed, and we cannot plead our case for pardon. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:9). The owner of the vineyard (God) has no patience for trees that refuse to bear fruit.

PROGNOSIS: Fruitful Trees

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Restored by the Holy Gardener

But apparently the owner of the vineyard has left the execution of righteousness in the hands of his gardener (v. 7), and the gardener seems to think there’s still hope for these rotten trees. He boldly requests another year, during which time he will treat the trees with manure and digging (v. 8). Out of the waste springs new life. The nutrients disposed of by animals restore fruit bearing to the tree and act as an analogy for the Lamb of God who is sacrificed to restore fruit bearing to rotten, condemned sinner. Christ died on his Cross with the same love for us that the gardener had for the fig tree. He uproots the sinful nature in us, brings it into the light of day, and disposes of it in his death and resurrection. In its place, he cultivates his righteousness in us so that we can come back to life and bear fruit in the vineyard once again.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Receiving the

Nutrients of the Gospel

What we discover as we grow in faith is that no terrorist can match the wrath of the owner of the vineyard, who has nevertheless entrusted his vineyard to this wonderful gardener. Just as the fig tree yields the dirt it is sitting in, so the faithful sinner yields up his or her sinfulness in the act of repentance. Our ground gets softer and our gardener does not have to dig so strenuously, for we let go of sin in the act of repentance and drink in the moisture of the gospel. Repentance has become a gift, given to us to repel the owner's wrath. As Jesus told many whom he healed, "Your faith has saved you."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Blessing the Vineyard*

A good fruit-bearing tree also helps the soil of the vineyard. Perhaps there are other trees there that aren't bearing fruit like the owner would hope. These too are in danger of being cut down. One of the fruits we bear is the gardening help we can give to other trees on behalf of The Gardener. Instead of obsessing from afar about the fate of others after they have fallen victim to some calamity, we roll up our sleeves and dig in to the work of helping people who are still alive to bear fruit for the owner of the vineyard. Our "spade" is the Word of God, administered tenderly – not to kill the tree, but to open it up for new growth – and our "manure" is laced with the nutrients and moisture of the gospel imparted to us by The Gardener. We are there to forestall the owner (God) from cutting them down until we have had a chance to apply The Gardener's tender loving care. In the end, the owner's vineyard flourishes, and the owner protects us all from the real danger of terror: loss of hope. In the "holy manure," we have an abundance of hope that will never be vanquished.