

Sermon for Sunday, March 16, 2025

Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In last week's sermon I spoke about how we are going to be hearing parables from Jesus during the season of Lent. And that the purpose of hearing these teachings is to help us gain a richer understanding of Jesus. It's always good to be reminded of his immense love for us. But the other intent of the parables is guide us in seeking an answer to the question "How then shall we live?"

Our reading for today contains one parable and one word picture. Here's what I mean. Verses 6-9 are the parable of the fig tree. Within verses 31-35 we have the image of a hen gathering her brood under her wings.

What is the purpose of a parable? A parable uses common items to teach the listener (us) kingdom truths: truths about Jesus and about what it means to live in God's kingdom. We generally take these common items and the characters in the parables and strive to figure out who or what they represent.

Let's do just that by considering the parable of the fig tree. This parable places a fig tree in a vineyard. Now, seriously, why should there be a tree in a vineyard? As you drive past the vineyard on Hwy 19 near Hobgoblin music, do you ever see a tree in the middle of it? As Jesus tells it, this fig tree is certainly out of place. Now, who or what might this "out-of-place" fig tree represent? Probably people or a people group. Could it be that in its earliest understanding, it represented the people Israel in the middle of the Roman empire? It's possible. As we think about this parable in our times, is it possible that we are a fig tree planted in a world that has lost sight of what it means to live in God's vineyard? Are we the fig tree in the middle of Vasa Village or in the middle of Goodhue County? *(Pause)*

There's a landowner in this parable and he wants to get rid of the fig tree because it is not producing any fruit. Who is the landowner? The likely answer is God. God the creator/father figures prominently in many of Jesus' parables. It seems that the landowner is getting frustrated because the tree isn't producing fruit as it was created to do. And the landowner is ready to just be

done...he's had enough....his patience is at an end....he doesn't want to waste any more time or energy on a non-productive tree.

Then there's the gardener who pleads for more time for the fig tree, promising to nurture it carefully in the hope that the tree will respond. Who is the gardener? Probably Jesus. The gardener sees potential and is willing to put in more effort. He pleads for time and offers to do the work needed to enhance the environment so that the tree will produce fruit. This image of a patient, hardworking and sacrificing gardener speaks volumes to us in describing Jesus. Jesus is the one who teaches and gives us new or refreshed ideas about who God is and how much God loves us. Jesus is the one who intervenes and says, let me do what I can to nurture the tree in this garden. Jesus, the one who places himself between the frustrated landowner and the unfruitful tree. *(Pause)*

The second image that comes from today's reading is the story of the hen gathering her chicks under her wings. There is an old story about a prairie chicken who sees a wildfire on the horizon. As the fire gets closer and closer she realizes that her chicks cannot fly over or outrun the flames. So the prairie chicken hen gathers her brood under her body. The flames roar over her and kill her, but the chicks survive.

Seems to me that this is another powerful image of Jesus. He is the protecting mother hen who sees danger on the horizon and realizing our human inability to flee calls to us so that we might gather under his wings for protection.

From this reading we have two images of Jesus:

1. The nurturing gardener who provides what is needed to strengthen and encourage the growth of the fig tree. Jesus being someone who is exceedingly patient and willing to make sacrifices, is working hard to nurture his garden.
2. The protective mother hen who places herself between danger and her brood. Jesus, the one who recognizes danger, calls his chicks to him and provides protection.

Now, let's consider how these images apply to us and to our lives. There's good news here my friends. First we have two beautiful descriptions of a Savior who does whatever it takes to protect and save us. And that's good, good news.

One of our fundamental Lutheran teachings is that we are saved by grace. Grace is the gift of love given to us by God and is given without our asking for or earning it. The "unearned" adjective is

important because nothing that we do provides us with God's love. God is like the mother hen who loves every single one of her chicks. God is like the grace-filled gardener who is going to do everything in his power to nurture a fig tree so that it will bear fruit.

But there are a couple of caveats to the saving grace that God provides. The first caveat is that the chicks better listen to the mother hen and scamper under her protecting wings when she signals danger because otherwise there will be serious consequences. While we have an extremely patient and nurturing protector and savior in the person of Jesus we better listen up. We better turn around and come when he calls. He will protect us, but it will be really hard if we choose to run in the other direction. If we run away he cannot protect us from the destructive forces that threaten us. At the same time we can rest assured that he will do everything in his power to save us, like the gardener with the fig tree.

The second caveat is that the fig tree is expected to produce. There will be consequences for a lack of productivity. And that's not good news. But the flip side of that bad news is that we must remember that God gives us everything that we need. If there is a lack especially due to a new circumstance, God will provide.

Today's Scripture reading is first and foremost a call to repentance; a call for humans to listen to God in Jesus and run to shelter under his wings. This same call means that we can no longer just exist like a fig tree that bears no fruit. Fig trees are created to bear fruit wherever they are planted and the same is true for us: we are called to act on behalf of those who have no voice in this world: the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and the imprisoned, those in need of clothing or shelter or refuge. In doing so we are serving God and bearing fruit for the kingdom. Amen.