

Travel Stories: *Manure* - wk 4

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - August 2, 2020

Luke 13:6-9 *The Message* paraphrase - (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

We're continuing our message series today looking at some of Jesus' conversations. These are the Travel Stories Jesus' told, while walking along and participating in the common things of life. As a main resource for this series, I've been drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*.

Here is one of Jesus' stories that is very odd. Luke drops it into the Samaria Travel Stories without introduction. It's in Luke 13:6-9. Unlike the stories of the neighbor, the friend, and the bigger barn builder, this parable has no conversation, question, or incident that triggers the telling of this story. So no context, so why is Jesus telling this story? It seems we have to carry this story with us for a little while, before the meaning becomes evident. Jesus will say something on Good Friday that connects back to this story. So we have to wait, if we want a quick answer, we're not going to get it. But the wait is worth it.

Now this waiting is a bit different from Jesus' other parables. For the most part Jesus' parables get us engaged in what God is doing in our world. Making neighbors of us, friends who will provide for others, and considering the needs of others. Jesus' stories keep us participating in acts of justice, loving kindness, and even walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). We see God is active and invites us to participate in the action.

Yet this parable is different, because there are other times when not-doing is commanded. This parable is about a fig tree that hasn't produced fruit. (In the Message paraphrase it's called an apple tree.) While the loud demand, "**Chop it down!**" startles us, it's the patience of "**Let it alone...**" that calms our human anxiety. "**Let it alone...**" is about patience and forgiveness. It's about God's amazing, never-running out, free grace. As Jesus' followers we can't make it without these. This parable is good news!

Let's consider first the "No" in this parable and the effect it may have on us. The gardener says, "**Let it alone...**" This is a "don't do." This is a prohibition and it isn't easy. Why? Because we want quick solutions and even quicker results. We want to do things. Small or great, *let's do something!*

We may see something that is wrong and we want to jump into action, righting the wrong or just telling people what's wrong, confronting the sin, confronting the problem, battling the enemy, and we may want to enlist others for this cause.

Just then this story comes back to us. "**Let it alone...**" When we have just come across something that offends us: some person who is useless to us or to God's kingdom, someone "**taking up the ground**" like this fruitless fig tree, we may lose patience, and then we want to physically or verbally get rid of them. "**Chop him down! Chop her down! Chop it down.**" And we've solved one

of the kingdom's problems by amputation. Or at least we thought we have. But why does Jesus say to not do that violent response? Why can't we "**Chop it down**"? Why "**Let it alone...**" when it's taking up useful ground?

What Jesus is asking is counter to what humans often do. Around the world and throughout history, sadly, killing seems to be humanity's main method for trying to make the world a better place. It is the easiest, quickest, and most efficient way to clear the ground for someone or something with more promise.

But this story interrupts our loud recruiting effort for quick problem-solving and in a quiet voice this parable says, ***"Hold on, not so fast. Wait a minute. Give me some more time. Let me put some manure on this tree."*** Manure. Why? Why not wipe things out and start with a clean slate? Why manure?

Manure is not a quick fix, have you noticed? It has no immediate results - it is going to take a long time to see if it makes any difference. If results are what we are after, then chopping down a tree is just the thing: we clear the ground and make it ready for a fresh start. We love beginnings: a newborn baby, christening a ship, the first day of a new job, choosing a new leader, and sometimes starting a war.

But spreading manure carries none of that exhilaration. It may even feel like we haven't really done anything.

Spreading manure is not dramatic, not glamorous work, not work that gets admiring attention. Manure is a slow solution.

Still, consider that when it comes to doing something about what is wrong in the world, Jesus is best known for his fondness for the minute, the invisible, the quiet, the slow - yeast - works invisibly in bread, salt - gives zest and taste and electrolytes for life, seeds do their resurrection work slowly and hidden in the ground, light - helps us see. And here we have another slow work - manure.

Manure is refuse, it doesn't rank high among the commodities. It is garbage. But horticulture majors, amateur gardeners, and farmers know that this apparently dead and despised waste is teeming with life - enzymes, numerous microorganisms, nitrates. It's the stuff of resurrection. And manure takes patience.

This manure story says God is not in a hurry. We have often read in Scripture, in fact we're repeatedly told in Scripture, "**Wait for the Lord.**" In the Christian life, the need for patience isn't new. But we reject this, if we have been told promises of instant gratification in the Christian life. We have no patience for God when God works as slowly, even if it is as effective, as manure. We want to see God working, which usually means swiftly. Manure takes patience.

God is patience. 2 Peter 3:9 says, **“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”** Anyone who spends any time at all walking through these Travel Stories with Jesus must learn to put up with this slowness, **“as some count slowness.”**

Now let’s consider the loud cry, **“Chop it down!”** A few days after Jesus told this story, most of His listeners still probably thought **“Chop it down!”** was the better solution. And a few days after telling this story, Jesus entered Jerusalem. Within a week the loud cry would be similar, the crowd was yelling, not **“Chop it down,”** but **“Crucify him!”** Here Eugene Peterson connects back to this fig tree parable’s **“Chop it down!”**

Roman official Pontus Pilate and temple leader Caiaphas agreed that Jesus had to go swiftly. Pontus Pilate saw Jesus as a threat to the peace the Roman army was trying to gain in Jerusalem. And temple leader Caiaphas saw Jesus as a threat to the profitable business he was running from the temple.

Jesus was like a fig tree **“taking up the ground”** needed for their own purposes. And so they killed him. The Farmer’s order, **“Chop it down!”** is echoed in the Holy Week cry **“Crucify him!”** But Jesus responded to their hostile violence with the same kind of **“Let it alone...”** from the Manure Story. Hanging from the cross, Jesus’ first

response was a prayer, **“Father, forgive them...”** **“...For they know not what they do.”** (Luke 23:34)

Jesus’ prayer to his Father, **“Forgive them,”** is a verbatim repetition of the gardener’s intervention, **“Let it alone.”** The Greek word is *aphes*. In some contexts it means *“Hands off.... Cool it.... Leave it alone....”* In other contexts having to do with sin and guilt it means *“Forgive... Remit....”* It is the word used in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught us, **“Forgive us our sins...”** (Luke 11:4). With this repetition the fig tree parable and Jesus’ prayer on the cross are connected.

The violence intended for the fig tree is deflected by the gardener’s **“Let it alone”** and the violence visited on Jesus is countered by **“Father, forgive them...”** (You can read more about that in William Willimon’s book, *Thank God It’s Friday*. As in Good Friday.) **“Let it alone”** was as much an act of grace and forgiveness as **“Father, forgive them...”** Both evidence of God’s forgiveness. And note, Jesus gave forgiveness before anyone was asking for forgiveness.

This is preemptive forgiveness. This is forgiveness before we sin and thus it’s free. No conditions or pre-conditions are given. Jesus prays that we would be forgiven before we have any idea that we even need forgiveness, **“for they know not what they do.”** Isn’t this the case for all of us? We know some of our mistakes and misjudgments, but so

many go unnoticed by us. How many times do we sin before 9 AM and not even know it?

We're not forgiven only if we remember and confess all our sins. This is preemptive forgiveness from Jesus. This is free forgiveness with no preconditions. This amazing grace is God's plan for us. Jesus says, ***"Give me some more time. I'm working on this one"*** with manure. Life teaming, Life nourishing, Life building manure.

So the point is, for those of us who are up to our necks in manure, which is to say, up to our necks in forgiveness, patience, love and grace, ***"Let it alone..."*** is perhaps Jesus' greatest statement of forgiveness, hidden in a parable of a fruitless fig tree.

In ***"Let it alone..."*** Jesus is showing us our Heavenly Father's love and grace and patience. Free forgiveness without preconditions: lowly manure teaming with Life, so we can live our lives. *I bet you'll never look at manure the same way again!*

Would you pray with me?

Thank You dear Father that we have all Your love and grace already because that is who You are! Thank you that we need not, nor cannot, earn Your love or grace, but can just receive it with grateful hearts. Empower us by Your Holy Spirit to share this with others. In Jesus Name, Amen.