A LITTLE MORE TIME, PLEASE

I’m not a gardener, and I’ve never worked on a farm, a vineyard or an orchard, so I haven’t experienced first-hand the kind of frustration that the vineyard owner in Jesus’ parable seems to have experienced. But I can certainly imagine it.

Three years without any results is a very long time to be waiting for anything. It’s TOO LONG, really, for 99.9% of us. Speaking for myself, I would have given up on that fig tree long before the vineyard owner did--and most certainly before the gardener working in the vineyard did. I know that patience is a virtue, but I mean, come on! Three years! Enough already! Just cut the fig tree down and plant another one that’s not as much trouble.

The vineyard owner was at the point of throwing in the towel. “That’s it!” he said. “I’m DONE with you, stupid fig tree. I refuse to waste any more effort on you. For three years, season after season, you haven’t given me a darned thing. You’re a waste of good soil. There’s no reason to keep you around anymore.”

But the gardener who worked for the vineyard owner saw things differently. “Hey, boss,” he said, “don’t cut it down yet. Give me a little more time, please. I’ll dig around that tree, throw some manure on it. That ought to help. If it doesn’t, THEN you can cut it down.”

What the heck was Jesus trying to say to us through this parable?
Well, it helps if we understand that the Bible is full of images of vineyards. In the book of Isaiah we read, “The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are the Lord’s pleasant planting.”

So the vineyard images in the Bible represent Israel, the people of Israel, God’s people. Israel is God’s vineyard. And things haven’t always gone so well in God’s garden. For example, the prophet Joel lamented that because of the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel in his day, “The vine withers, the fig tree droops.”

So, God’s people collectively--Israel, and yes, the Christian church today, are the vineyard. And in Jesus’ parable, God has come to collect the fruits of the vineyard that are rightfully God’s; but there’s no fruit to be found. And God’s patience is wearing thin. God is thinking, “Time’s up! Cut it down!” But here comes the gardener--the gardener surely represents Jesus--who says, “Master, let the tree alone. Allow me to spread some manure around it and care for it a little while longer. Maybe I can help bring the tree to fruition. If the fertilizer and my extra effort don’t succeed, then you can get rid of it.”

By the way, here’s a piece of Bible trivia for you. In my research for this sermon, I read that the Greek word koprion, which is translated as “manure” or “dung,” in this morning’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, is actually a crude and very impolite word that’s inappropriate to use in sermons or church conversations, and is used only once in the whole New Testament--here in this parable. I think you know the word I’m referring to. Some of you have probably used this particular substance in your gardens or on your lawns. You know the texture and the smell of it. You also know its effectiveness, how it’s able to invigorate your plants and vegetables.
So, why would the author of Luke use this crude form of the word for dung, or manure?

Well, MY thought is, as far as this unfruitful fig tree goes, the time for niceties and politeness is over. It’s been three years; it’s time for more drastic, earthy measures.

You see, for all intents and purposes, the fig tree OUGHT to be cut down. The owner of the vineyard is perfectly justified in his negative, born-of-frustration judgment about that tree. But, thanks to the pleading of the gardener, there’s still time for the fig tree to bear the fruit it’s supposed to bear.

So, there’s mercy here in this parable. It’s message is all about undeserved, unearned grace toward God’s people. NOT the dignified, somber, “O Lord, have mercy on us” church kind of grace and mercy. Rather, it’s an emergency room, last hope measure; a “we need to spread some manure on this barren tree to help it live” variety of mercy and grace. Call it “resurrection” grace.

What do you do for a church that’s dead in the water? What do you do when God’s people only want to go through the motions of living out their faith and don’t produce much, if any, good fruit? According to Jesus, you spread a lot of manure on them. It just might help and prevent it from being cut down. Hopefully.

You know, in this wonderful country of ours, with its freedom of religion and no threats or persecutions or dangers to speak of as we live out our faith and follow Christ, it’s easy to reach a point where we “fig trees,” God’s people, simply stop producing fruit. Blame it on apathy, or on laziness or low expectations; call it taking our precious faith for granted or whatever you want to call it; but the result is that we trees become unproductive and are basically worthless to the vineyard owner. Interestingly, sometimes the BEST manure
for such fruitless Christians is having their faith challenged, or making it known that their faith is at risk and could be cut down.

The Rev. Dr. William Willimon once wrote about the time a friend of his came to visit from Africa. It was a time when he was chaplain at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina. Willimon wrote: “My friend is a pastor (there in Africa). He’s had a tough time, my friend and his church. They’ve been persecuted by the government, persecuted by neighboring Muslims. Tough. I was so glad for him to visit us here in North America, where we have the freedom to be religious in any way we want. Which, I found out, by my friend’s standards, isn’t very religious.

“How many baptisms have you done here this past year,” he asked me.

“How many baptisms did you do last year?” I asked him.

“Well, at first only a couple of hundred. But then, when the persecution started, we were doing forty or fifty every month. I will tell my friends when I go back to Africa, ‘I met a brother who has remained faithful and kept preaching and working with only six baptisms!’ That’s wonderful!”

That story got me thinking, sometimes as we live out our Christian faith, we’re like the tree that needs manure to get us to be fruitful again. And sometimes maybe we’re more like the gardener, carrying on, daring to continue witnessing to our faith and proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord even if the result is a fig tree with no figs. And maybe, when we get frustrated or discouraged and start to wonder why we bother to follow Christ and share our faith with others when it seems to make no difference at all, maybe that’s when the example of
the gardener in this parable of Jesus can be of help. Because, like that gardener, we can say, “Don’t cut it down yet. I’ll give it more time, continue to cultivate the soil and throw some manure on it, and see if something might come of it down the road and some fruit might develop. After all, God is giving ME more time to come to fruition as one of God’s people and Jesus’ followers, so why shouldn’t I do the same for others and not give up on them too soon.”

By the way, here’s another little in depth piece of information that might put a different spin on this parable. The Greek word *aphes* is the word translated as, “Let it alone.” As in, “Master, let the fig tree alone. I’ll put manure on it, dig it, and we’ll see what happens.”

That word, *aphes*, is the same New Testament word for “forgiveness.” So, in effect, the gardener, Jesus, was asking the vineyard owner, God, to forgive the fig tree for not bearing fruit, for not being all that the fig tree was capable of being.

“Master, forgive the fig tree. Give it a little more time, please. Let it alone. I’ll care for it, nourish it, watch over it and help it, and hopefully by this time next year there will be fruit on its branches.”

Ours is such a wonderful God, my friends: a gracious God, a merciful God, a compassionate God, a truly loving God. And God in Christ is giving us more time--more time to be all that we can be as God’s people and Jesus’ followers. God is giving us a little more time to blossom and grow and produce good fruit for God’s vineyard. Lent is a time for us to open our hearts to receive what the good and determined gardener, Christ, wants to give us and do for us so that we will go on to live and flourish and bear much good fruit on behalf of God’s Kingdom.
Thank God for Jesus Christ, the gardener, who asks the vineyard owner, God, to please give us a little more time. May we use that time wisely, effectively, and fruitfully, in loving gratitude and to the glory of God. Amen.