



February 28, 2016

A Lenten sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Figs, Fertilizer, and Fruit

Luke 13:1-9

At 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.'

6 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. 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 round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

The hardest concept in Christianity for many of us is the idea of grace. It is a wonderful name for a church, (Grace Presbyterian, Grace Lutheran...). We use the word in our favorite hymns: "God of Grace...", "Amazing Grace". But the very idea of grace runs counter to many of our normal human inclinations and institutions. Second and third chances are rare, except in baseball. Even there we declare, "Three strikes and you're out!" Grace is a troublesome concept. But grace is at the core of our relationship with God, and it needs to be at the heart of our relationships with others.

This morning we will look at **expectations** and **grace**.

I

Why expectations? Life is filled with expectations. We expect the car we purchase will run well and perform to our standards. We expect the computer will perform the tasks we give it. Relationships have expectations. we expect the employee will show up on time and perform her job well. We expect the contractor to complete the addition to our home on time. We expect love, support and faithfulness from our spouse. Every relationship is built upon expectations: sometimes clear, sometimes tacit.

We have expectations that affect this moment. You have expectations of me that I will be:

- biblical,
- interesting,
- relevant,
- funny,
- engaging,
- and no longer than 12 minutes.

I have expectations of you that you will be listening, (hanging on my every word), present. We have expectations that the room here will be comfortable. Not too hot or too cold. The organ will play. The choir will be rehearsed. We have a host of expectations that are at work in this very moment.

A great deal of the consternation and conflict in our lives is tied up in expectations: expectations that are unrealistic and expectations that are unmet. We get angry at the government, the church, the teacher, the contractor, the employee, the pastor, the spouse, the friend when they fail to meet our expectations.

When Jesus told the Parable of the Fig Tree, he was addressing unmet expectations. Jesus had an interesting relationship with fig trees. In both Matthew and Mark there is an account of Jesus “cursing a fig tree” because it didn’t bear any fruit. His curse was that it would never bear fruit... never! Some have suggested that Luke’s Parable of the Fig Tree is a “kindler, gentler” version of that encounter. If it is, it is also a more gracious version and can teach us a great deal about expectations and grace. Let’s take a closer look.

Few of us would argue with the expectation that a fig tree should bear fruit. That was the owner’s expectation and when it failed after three years, he said, “Enough! Cut it down!” He didn’t want to waste his resources on something that wouldn’t produce. “Cut it down.”

The quick interpretation of the text, given its context, is that Jesus used this parable to explain God’s relationship with humanity. God has expectations of us and when we don’t produce, God responds accordingly.

The Parable of the Fig Tree is first a parable about God’s judgment upon humanity. It is the story of Adam and Eve of being kicked out of the Garden of Eden. It is the story of Noah and the Ark. It is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is the story of unmet expectations and harsh judgment: “Cut it down.”

But in this parable we have a different view of God’s judgment. **God’s justice is tempered by grace.** Jesus taught that God deals with humanity graciously. This parable also speaks to our relationships. Are we gracious with one another? Does grace characterize our response to unmet expectations of each other?

II

The response of the gardener is instructive: “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put fertilizer on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” The gardener’s response is twofold: one more year, and fertilizer. Grace is not merely a second chance: “one more year”. Grace is not merely letting someone off: “one more year”. There is an additional component to the gardener’s response: **nurture**: “I will dig round it and put fertilizer on it.” Not only does he plead for one year, he is willing to invest time, effort, and resources to give this tree an additional opportunity to produce and meet expectations. Once again, within the context of the parable, Jesus was communicating that God does not merely forgive and forget. No!

- God instructs.
- God encourages.
- God nurtures.

Do we do the same when our expectations are not met?

I had a very difficult first year in college. I was too young and too immature. I was passing and was not in any danger of probation, but was merely drifting along. I received a message in the campus mail one day to see the head of the Department of Religion and Philosophy. I had never met him, but he had a reputation of being an erudite intellectual and consequently extremely intimidating. I showed up and he told me that I should be doing better. I was not meeting expectations. But then he took another step. He offered to become my academic advisor. Additionally, he would spend time with me once a week going over my assignments. He also offered to supervise an independent study for me. Once a week, we would get together for an hour and discuss theology, philosophy, church and society, problems in ethics. I am forever grateful to him. In that initial encounter, he not only expressed that I was not meeting expectations, he, like the gardener, made the effort to nurture me toward meeting those expectations. It was a moment of grace in my life.... amazing grace that saved a lazy student like me. I learned a great deal from my professor... but most importantly, I learned that grace calls us to be invested in the lives of others.

Life is filled with unmet expectations and often they degenerate into hurt, pain, and conflict. There are a lot of proverbial fig trees that are not bearing fruit. When someone or something does not measure up, when a relationship does not bear fruit, when it disappoints... how do we respond? Do we cut the fig tree down? Or do we let it grow one more year, dig around it, and nurture it with fertilizer. Do we give it the best opportunity to produce?

This message of grace is important to a congregation that is beginning the process of calling a new pastor. There are a host of expectations built into this process. We expect the new pastor to be good in all areas, and particularly excellent in those tasks that are important to us. I have served congregations for over 39 years and have done a great deal of reflecting upon what makes for successful pastorates. An effective ministry requires more than the skills of the pastor. It requires a relationship between the pastor and congregation characterized by grace.

Your next pastor will disappoint you at some time. You will also disappoint your next pastor. There will be expectations that are not met by either party... When that happens, grace needs to abound; grace that let's go of disappointment; grace that encourages; grace that nurtures; grace that builds up; grace that invests in the relationship. It will be a while before a new pastor is presented to you... but you can start practicing and experiencing the joy of amazing grace now.

One final comment about the parable: Jesus never told us how it ends! Does the fig tree produce? Was it eventually cut down? Grace, true grace, has no guarantee. That is why it is grace. That is why it amazing. That is why it is Good News. Amen.