

Sermon for Sunday, March 3, 2013 Lent III Luke 13:1-9 "Figs Are Not Grapes"

It is a fact. Study the Bible, and you can look at things over and over again and you see what you expect to see, what you've always seen, but the truth is that you have been missing something that you should have noticed.

I like to think that I'm a halfway decent student of Scripture, but I am as likely to miss something surprising and completely obvious in the Bible as the next person. So when I began my preparation on today's gospel, I immediately thought of the way that Jesus uses this parable of the fig tree to talk about fruitfulness and about penitence. I was in good company – most of the commentaries on the parable say pretty much the same thing. Nothing surprising there – this is a message that Jesus says either directly or through parables elsewhere in the gospels.

But I was missing something. Something I hadn't noticed before. So much for being a smarty-pants Biblical scholar.

I didn't notice it until it was mentioned by a colleague, the Rev Eric Law, an Asian-American priest who works on the West Coast. Eric was leading a Bible study on today's gospel passage with a group of Chinese refugees. One of the people in the group posed a question: "What's a fig tree doing in a vineyard?"

Wow. The obvious question, and one that no one ever posed before. What's a fig tree doing in a vineyard? If you've ever gone on one of those winery tours, you'll see row upon row of well-tended vines, beautifully supported by trellises or frames. Occasionally, you will see a rose bush planted at each end of a row of vines, a tradition that was brought from France. But you will never see another plant that will take nutrients from the soil that could benefit the grapevines. A grower would not compromise his plantings by throwing a wild card into the ground, and a fig tree could be considered such a wild card.

What is a fig tree doing in a vineyard? It doesn't belong there. It is like the old children's game "one of these things is not like the other." The fig tree doesn't belong there.

But let's assume, at this stage of this sermon, that the grower had his reasons for planting the fig tree in the vineyard. Maybe he didn't have another spot for it, maybe he just didn't think much about it and just plopped it there on a hot afternoon when he didn't have the energy to put it in its proper place.

The grower goes out into the vineyard, sees that fig tree there, and is aggravated, because this is the third year that tree has leafed out, but it still hasn't fruited.

Now imagine you're living in a hot place, where water is at a premium. For three years you've waited for this tree to offer you something in return for the nurturing and water...and you've gotten not a single fig. You can taste the rich luscious sweetness in your imagination, but you sure can't taste it in real life, because this useless tree still hasn't produced a single fig. Can you feel the frustration and annoyance that the grower is feeling? So, not surprisingly, the grower says to his gardener, "Trash that tree. It is a waste of land and water."

Makes sense, doesn't it? Why would you keep such a fruitless tree in your yard? And it isn't entirely out of character for a grower to do that. After all, every year he instructs his gardener to prune the grapevines, so that they might be more fruitful. It's a common practice – indeed, it is one that is encouraged for grapes - to get rid of dead vines that no longer produce. So why not yank that fig tree out of the ground and toss it on the compost pile?

The gardener has another idea. "Sir, let me nurture it for another year, put manure around it, give it some extra water. I think if we are patient, it will fruit next year. And if it doesn't, I will dispose of it as you wish."

The gardener wants to give the fig tree one more chance to do what it is meant to do, to be fruitful.

Jesus doesn't tell us what the grower says in response to this request – we presume he grudgingly agrees. He has his doubts, but he thinks "what can it harm me to give it one more year?"

One more chance.

Now here's where it gets interesting, because I want to loop back to that Bible study that Father Eric was leading. The same person who asked why a fig tree was in the vineyard asked another question. "What kind of fruit is this man looking for?" He continued his inquiry. "If he is looking for grapes, he isn't going to find any. Besides, the Chinese name of fig is no-flower fruit; so a fig tree bears fruit very differently from the grapevines."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe the grower was expecting his fig tree to produce in exactly the same way that his grapes did. Here's a Google fact for today: it takes fig trees between three and five years to produce fruit.<sup>2</sup>

So it wasn't so odd for three years to pass without fruit for that fig tree. The fig tree was doing exactly what fig trees do. They grow for a few years before they start to produce. Perhaps the gardener knew this, perhaps not. But something in him said, "maybe if we continue to encourage this tree, it will fruit next year."

More likely, and to state the obvious, the gardener knew that the fig tree was not a grapevine. Fig trees and grapevines are very different plants, and you cannot expect a fig tree to act like a grapevine. Fig trees take longer to produce first fruit. By the same token, they do not require the rigorous pruning and trellising that grapes do. Grapes are not the same as figs, and that is just fine.

The fig tree got a second chance. The gardener was willing to work with the tree and encourage it, when that vineyard owner was ready to judge it permanently useless.

As with all of Jesus' parables, there are the interpretations that are built on the most obvious reading, and there are the deeper ones that we discover when we look for the thing that was there all along and that we all missed.

This is not just a story about fruitfulness, and how the trees that do not bear fruit will be destroyed. It is also a story about second chances, about the fact that each of us need second chances.

None of us is fruitful all the time. We have our fallow times, our times of darkness and troubles, our times when we have nothing to offer the world. But somehow, the Lord keeps giving us second chances, nudging us toward fruitfulness once again. We do need that, don't we?

And the corollary to that – you knew I'd turn this around, don't you? – is that none of us has the right to act like the vineyard owner, judging that something or someone is useless and needs to be discarded. If the Lord is willing to give us a second chance, if the Lord sees that each of us develops as spiritual beings at different rates and keeps on nurturing us even when it seems we will never get it, if the Lord says "one more year," who are we to judge who is fruitful and who should be cast out into the darkness?

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ehflaw.typepad.com/blog/2013/02/a-fig-tree-in-a-vineyard.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ehow.com/facts\\_7472639\\_long-fig-tree-produce-fruit.html](http://www.ehow.com/facts_7472639_long-fig-tree-produce-fruit.html)