

Clear Out Your Impatience

A sermon preached on Luke 13:1-9 on Sunday, March 23, 2025,
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC
I.

In the hills overlooking Oakland, California, there stands a tree that time and neighborly affection has nicknamed the “Grandfather” or “Old Survivor.” Old Survivor is the only old-growth redwood still standing, weathering more than 500 years of life and industrialization, particularly following the logging of all the other ancient redwoods during the Gold Rush. Old Survivor has what you might call a cult following among local naturalists and hikers and lovers of local history, in part because of its location. You see, Old Survivor is rather hard to find. It sits on a steep rocky slope, which also makes it hard to reach. And at 93 feet with a twisted up trunk, it’s hard to use for timber. Meaning: Old Survivor became Old Survivor because it appeared to be largely useless to loggers.

It’s sort of the anti-*Giving Tree*, no shade to Shel Silverstein. (Pun intended.) In her book, *How to Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell calls the story of Old Survivor a real-life version of the story from fourth-century Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zhou called “The Useless Tree.” The story tells of another gnarled, overlooked tree deemed worthless for timber by the carpenters who pass by. One carpenter in particular has a dream that night about the tree, in which the tree asks “are you comparing me with the other useful trees that bear fruit and timber? Those are ravaged daily. But my uselessness – this is of great use to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?”¹

¹ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, p xv - pxvii.

II.

I've told you before of this story of Old Survivor and the Useless Tree, trees that – despite their surroundings – have a distinct presence and story to tell. And now let's turn to another tree with a story to tell, a story told by Jesus of a fig tree in a garden, a tree without any figs. The man who had a fig tree planted in his garden came to pick some, found his tree empty, and took out his anger on the gardener. "What's going on here?," the man demanded to know. "For three years now I've come to this tree expecting figs and not one fig have I found. Chop it down! Why waste good ground with it any longer? What use have I of it? "Give it one more year," the optimistic gardener pleads. "Let me fertilize it and offer extra care for it in the meantime. If it bears fruit next year, good! If not, cut it down." *This is the word of the Lord?*

Now you should know that Jesus's listeners would likely look around to see fig trees – they were populous in the region, one of the more prominent trees of Palestine and a symbol throughout the Hebrew scriptures for the blessings of the land, or in the absence of figs, the curse. So why would Jesus tell *this* story?

III.

In order to answer that, let's back up just a bit to what immediately preceded his telling of it. The first part of our text recalls two tragic events in the context of Jesus's life – one, an act of spite as Pilate, the authoritarian Governor of Rome, ordered the killing of Galileans who were worshiping at the Temple and then – to add insult to injury – mixed their blood with those of the Jewish sacrifices. If it sounds gruesome to your ears, it is – and was sacrilegious too to the observant Jews who had gathered at the Temple for worship. And the second story, a collapse of the tower of Siloam – seemingly

a random act, not one caused by human force – which killed eighteen people nearby. Given the scale of human suffering in these two events, it's no wonder that those who come to Jesus want to know why. *Why were these Galileans the ones that Pilate killed?*, they surely wondered. As Jesus told them about the tower of Siloam, they were curious, *why were these eighteen the ones the falling tower crushed? Was it random, or were they especially dreadful sinners to deserve such treatment? Had God forsaken them? Was God being silent?* And implicit behind the questions is the fear: *whether these disasters were human-inflicted or random, did God cause their suffering because of their sin?*

“No,” Jesus says, and he could end right there or at least say it louder for the cheap seats in the back, for how many centuries of human life have we wondered the same. How often have we heard of an international tragedy, or a terrible diagnosis, or a grievous loss and wondered why God caused that to happen? How often have we, in the face of suffering in our own lives, wondered what I did to bring such punishment my way? How have we struggled to hear Jesus through the fear and the anger, the doubt and the despair saying clearly, loudly, emphatically, “no, God did not do that!” No, God does not move the puzzle pieces of the world around such that God’s people suffer at the divine command! As a writer I love says, ‘God did not make us to hate us!’ When any part of creation suffers, God’s heart is the first to break, God’s tears are the first to fall.

“No,” Jesus says to these named and unnamed questions, “but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” This call to repentance – to *metanoia* in the Greek, to a wholesale “turning,” a complete 180, a “change of one’s mind and heart and life” – this call should perk up their ears and ours, because Jesus is picking up on a repeating theme in Luke, particularly in

chapter 12 just before today's text. The images have been building, as one scholar says, like a "poetic waterfall."² Let's go back a little further. *Think of it this way*, Jesus says: do you respect human authorities? Then how much more would you respect the One with the authority to send you to Gehenna, the big trash heap? *Or think of it this way*: there once was a rich man hoarding his possessions, but to him, God says, "you fool! Your life will end tonight! What good will all this stuff be to you?" *Or think of it this way*: you're like a group of servants, lamps lit and busy and ready for action, because God could come at any time. *Or think of it this way*: you and the person accusing you walk into court. But don't wait! Settle the dispute before you get there, otherwise you could end up wiling away in prison until you've paid the last cent. With each of these stories, this waterfall grows, and the message becomes clear: *The time has come to change your ways, so don't wait! Do it now!*

Remember this context as Jesus rejected the premise of their questions about suffering – maddeningly! – and evaded them by telling a story about a fig tree. (I may use this very tactic with my children when they ask me for things, and I change the subject!) You know, centuries of biblical interpretation have struggled with the tension and the mystery it leaves behind and chosen to allegorize this parable. They've wondered who is who – who is the impatient man? Who is the compassionate gardener? And for far too long, the dominant telling of this story assigns God to the role of the impatient man – angry at our sin, uncompromising in the ways we've fallen short of the glory of God, unwilling to let it carry on because it's drying and

² Thanks to the SALT Project for this imagery! This paragraph is built on their careful exegesis: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/20/life-and-death-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

deadening our fruitfulness, and ready to bring an axe to our necks for our ruthless unfaithfulness.

But do we remember what Jesus did? He left the parable open and invited us to step in ourselves, maddening as that may be. But just before telling it, he told us about the character and nature of God. He told us, “No, God doesn’t cause suffering; no, God didn’t murder those Galileans or bring down the tower upon the heads of the faithful.” God is not ruthless and unkind! God is not unwilling to budge and unable to compromise!

From that I have to wonder – if God might not be the impatient man ready to chop down the unproductive, useless tree, then who is? And it dawns on me: I am. You are. We are, we humans obsessed with hurry and usefulness and getting it right. We spend our lives like that tree, popping out new leaves and longer branches – managing our households and paying our bills and making dinner for a grieving friend and calling our congresspeople and filing our taxes and checking off our lists and thinking that we’re practical, purposeful citizens who can keep up and hold on.

But as good as these things are, they aren’t the fruit. They aren’t the essence. They aren’t the thing we’re put on this earth to bring forth and cultivate and bear into the world. The heart of it all that matters most of all is the fruit! The fruit is what we put off until another day. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with my life,” we think to ourselves, “but who has time to figure that out when summer camps for kids need to be booked and I need to take mama to a doctor’s appointment.” “I’m not sure what my legacy will be when I’m gone,” we muse, “but I can’t worry about that right now – the work deadline! The debt to pay off! All those emails I haven’t yet responded to!

The political firestorm of the hour that is occupying my mind and heart! Don't you see what I'm up against? I'll get there eventually!"³

So when we can't pause, just cut it down, we say. Where we don't like what we see, just take it away. This tree doesn't work? Pull it up and plant another that has better reviews and better metrics. Give me a faster connection, a more entertaining distraction, a more numbing pleasure. Clear out the evidence of my impatience. Toss the proof of my unease. Throw away anything that slows me down, or trips me up, or gets in the way of my drive. And all the while, we don't even realize what we're doing to ourselves as we miss the most useful thing of all: bearing fruit, the kind of fruit of our lives that when we're being honest with ourselves, we each long most to offer.

To us, Jesus says it's not too late. Repent, turn your heart and mind around. Come home to the tender care I've been offering all along. Let me, like a gardener, tend your roots, and care for your soul, and bring you back from the brink. Let me tell you another story than the one the world keeps telling. Have patience, dear ones, when my grace meets your stubbornness. That fig tree is alive! *Don't you want to be more alive?*

IV.

You know the story of the historic Lahaina banyan tree on Maui's northwest coast that was charred in August 2023 when a fire tore through Lahaina. For nearly 150 years, the 60 foot high, one acre-wide banyan tree had stood right at the heart of Lahaina – one, you might say, right at the heart of Maui – shading residents and guests, artists and children, native roosters and even Josh and I about a year prior under its maze of grandiose, spindly

³ Thanks to the effervescent Barbara Brown Taylor for this image of humans as growers of leaves and branches, but missing the point of the fruit in her sermon, "The Wake-Up Call," in *Always a Guest: Speaking of Faith Far from Home*, p139.

branches. Since the fire, a host of arborists, landscapers, and volunteers have tended the banyan tree with love: fertilizing the roots deeply, monitoring growth, watering daily, offering blessing and care. There is still much healing to come, but the tree is, once again, covered in leaves and branches because gardeners tended its roots. Thanks to patience and intention, life has once again found a way.⁴

From Lahaina to another scorched landscape, we turn to trees this time in Los Angeles, where I read this week about LA's canopies of oaks and orange trees, pines and palm trees who have remained standing amidst their neighborhoods ravaged by January's fires that consumed nearly everything in its wake. How are they still standing?, residents have wondered. Shouldn't they have burned down? Well it seems they are standing because these trees have deep roots, and from those deep roots, they draw water from the land. So while the houses around them were more flammable, many of the trees remained; some are even still producing fruit! "That was a shocker," said Douglas Kent, an LA-based landscape architect specializing in fire safety. "What I saw in Altadena was that if you were deep-rooted, you survived. Native [tree] or not, it didn't make a difference."⁵

V.

Sisters and brothers, my prayer for us this Lent, my prayer for us this life is this. May your lives be purposeful – not to this world who just might be lured to use them up, but to the God who desires you to bear fruit for the sake of Love. May your lives be deep-rooted and nourished by the waters of peace, of relationships, of rest, of care. May your lives be urgent with hope

⁴ <https://www.hawaiimagazine.com/a-ray-of-hope-the-lahaina-banyan-tree/>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/card/2025/03/21/us/la-fires-trees>

and patient for growth. And may the one who gave us life on a tree atop a hill far away, be the One we mistake as the gardener, the One who helps us find our way home again and again, now and forevermore. Amen!