

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Amy Foster
February 28, 2016

Exodus 3:1-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Psalms 63:1-8

Luke 13:1-9

From the Book of Common Prayer: O gracious God, bless the lands and waters, and multiply the harvests of the world; let your Spirit go forth, that it may renew the face of the earth; show your loving-kindness, that our land may give her increase; and save us from selfish use of what you give, that men and women everywhere may give you thanks; through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

In today's gospel, we heard about a fig tree—a fig tree that wasn't bearing any fruit. When you heard the story today, it might have reminded you of another gospel story about an underperforming fig tree. In that other story, found in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is hungry and curses a fig tree that has no fruit, causing it to wither immediately. The disciples are amazed at what they observe, and Jesus uses the opportunity to teach them about faith.

But today's story is different. It doesn't intend to describe actual events, but instead is a parable told by Jesus. In this parable, we also find a fig tree with no fruit—in fact, there haven't been any figs on that tree for three years. The owner of the tree is getting impatient with the lack of fruit, but before any cursing or withering can occur, the gardener steps in to try to save the tree and give it another chance. He says to the owner that, instead of cutting it down, maybe they should do something different to help nurture the tree; the gardener wants the chance to “dig around it and put manure on it” in the hope that he can turn things around and allow the tree to flourish. The gardener's patience as well as his willingness to try a new approach to help the tree thrive can be important lessons for us as we travel through the season of Lent.

Today's parable caused me to reflect on the two dish gardens that my husband and I have in our living room at home. The dish gardens were given to us when our each of our fathers passed away, my husband's in 1993, and mine in 2006. These meaningful plants have a special place in our front window. Now, despite the fact that I still think of the 1990s as just a few years ago, it has actually been 23 years since we received that first dish garden! It arrived with several beautiful plants brimming from a simple basket. For many years I watered those plants and watched them grow, but, one by one the various plants died until only the philodendron was left. That final plant held out for quite a long time, growing more and more spindly as time went on, and looking pretty sad by the time the second dish garden came our way. But, I just kept watering away, until finally I had to admit that the leaves that had fallen off were not ever

coming back, and I was simply watering a dead plant. I put it outside in the hope that it would somehow come back to life, and I even kept watering it when it was clearly beyond hope. It was sad, and I wasn't sure what to do. After all, this was more than just a house plant; it represented a loved one in our family. Now, I don't know why this hadn't occurred to me before, but finally I realized that I could get new plants to place in the basket. I could dig and plant and fertilize, just like the gardener did for the fig tree, giving the dish garden a second chance. No, the plants wouldn't be the original plants given in memory of my father-in-law, but the meaning would be the same. Once I had replanted and revitalized the dish garden, in fact, the memories were more alive. And it also meant that when some of the plants in my father's dish garden started to fail, I knew that I could replenish and enhance the garden—I understood that just doing the same old watering wasn't going to be enough to make the dish garden last forever; I had to be willing to dig in the dirt, pull out the old, and to plant something new to allow the garden to thrive.

So, just as the gardener in today's parable does with the fig tree, digging in the ground and spreading manure, I also had to take a new approach for the health of my dish gardens. And, just as the gardener is patient with his tree, so God is patient with us, working with us to help us grow and always willing to give us another chance. But God is not the only "gardener" working our soil—we have to join God in doing the work of pruning and digging and fertilizing to cultivate our faith and our relationships.

This is the opportunity that Lent provides for us. It is a time to reflect on the pruning and digging and fertilizing we each need to do and encourages us to try out something new to feed and nourish our faith. Lent encourages to ask what we need to dig away and prune from our lives. What might this be for each of us? Do we need to dig out uncharitable thoughts? Prune away bad habits? Uproot our stereotypes and prejudices? Lent also encourages us to spread some manure, to incorporate into our lives thoughts and actions that will enrich our hearts and souls and, in turn, enrich the lives of others. What might this be for each of us? Do we need to deepen our commitment to prayer and worship? Spread more seeds of love and generosity? Grow our capacity for forgiveness? As individuals and as a community, we, like the gardener, must patiently but continually tend the gardens of our lives. In doing so, with God's ever present help, our lives will bear sweet, delicious fruit.