

Tending Our Figs

by Rev. Don Garrett

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Is it possible for a functional illiterate to be elected President of the United States who says, “I do not read newspapers, I watch TV”? That was the idea behind Jerzy Kosinski’s movie, “Being There.” Its main character knew absolutely nothing of the world or human relationships – he didn’t even understand most of what he saw on TV. But he did know how to garden *so well* that people assumed him to be wise. He would respond to questions about economics and policy with answers like, “As long as the roots are not severed, all is well and all will be well in the garden,” and “It is possible for everything to grow strong, and there is plenty of room for more trees and flowers in the garden.”

Agriculture has proven to be such a durable metaphor for wisdom that we can probably say everything we need to know about life without leaving the garden. Sages and teachers have used agricultural metaphors for so long that we automatically give such statements a great deal of authority. The teacher called Jesus of Nazareth was particularly fond of them for expressing the sometimes difficult truths about human nature. One of his shortest parables can be found in the book of Luke, where Jesus says,

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So 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?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

The parable of the fig tree is about something we all experience: trying to decide what is worthwhile. We all get involved in projects that have this turning point.

The guy plants a fig tree and it doesn't yield fruit. Should he cut it down or keep taking care of it? What are the chances there'll be fruit later? How do we decide whether to continue to believe in something that hasn't paid off?

Back in the 90's when I was in divinity school, I got a phone call from a charity fund drive. It was a cause of which I approve, and support when I can, but can't always do so. It went something like this:

“We're hoping you can share your figs with this important cause.

Can we count on your support, Mr. Garrett?”

“I'd like to, but I just haven't produced any figs this year.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. I hope this will be a figgier year for you. We appreciate your past support. I'll call you next year to see if you can help us then.”

I felt awful. After all, I had produced a couple of figs, but they were already gone. I'd traded them for food, books and health insurance. It definitely had been a low fig year, but that didn't help too much. After all, men my age should be at the peak of their fig power, and here I was, living like a figless youth.

Going back to school in midlife sounds like a grand idea. Leaving behind a career in graphics for a new one in the ministry. Going to college and graduate school, learning a whole bunch of interesting new things, getting ready to help heal troubled souls and change the world for the better. But, still, there's that place inside that's uneasy about it, that looks at my fig tree and asks, “What do you think you're doing, ignoring your responsibility? You should be producing your own bountiful harvest of fresh, sweet, juicy figs, and here you are gnawing on stale Fig Newtons from the discount store!”

I appreciated the fundraiser's confidence in my good will and future figs. Everyone wants people to think they are worthwhile. In a purely commercial transaction, things might go differently. When a merchant finds that you're not buying anything, that's pretty much it. You're no longer a customer. A merchant with different values, like my nice fundraiser, might still consider you to be a person worthy of esteem and attention. Has that happened to any of you? Can you remember how good it feels when someone stays friendly and open to you? Like the gardener in the parable, the merchant might continue to give time and

attention to an unprofitable customer, in the faith that eventually the relationship might yield fruit.

This is easy to understand in economic situations like these: fund raising and retail. The solicitor has a goal and the relationship is a means to that goal: profit. But is the parable of the fig tree about commercial profit? What are these figs; what is the vineyard?

Time and again the Hebrew Scriptures refer to the vine and fig tree as the special gifts of God to God's chosen people, and they're used to mean a number of things, all of them good. Israel itself is likened to a vine, transplanted to Canaan from Egypt, and the vineyard serves as a symbol of both agricultural wealth and divine blessing. And the production of wine from fruit of the vine served as the symbol for spiritual transformation, as something good went through a process of apparent decay only to emerge as something mysteriously wonderful: wine. Like the unfermented grape, the barren fig tree can stand for spiritual potential, and this is what it does here. The tree has failed to yield for three years, but the counsel is patience.

How do we decide what to keep and what to throw away? Do we keep on taking care of a barren tree or do we cut our losses and chop it down? It depends on what we're looking for. If you're trying to raise money for your cause and someone doesn't give you any, you might scratch that person off your list. But if you're looking for a friend and ally, the relationship may be worth cultivating whether there is a contribution that year or not.

There's a children's book that I like, called *The Velveteen Rabbit*, by Margery Williams. I read it to my daughter, Cypress, when she was small. It begins one Christmas morning when a little boy finds a stuffed rabbit in his stocking. Even though he got a lot of toys and presents that day, the boy loved the rabbit for at least two hours. But then there were guests and dinner, and the rabbit ended up in a cupboard, mostly forgotten, taunted as insignificant by fancier toys, and as unreal by proud and arrogant mechanical toys like the model train that could run around on its track.

The rabbit's only friend was a stuffed horse who was very old and worn, but also very wise. He explained that only certain toys could become real, because

real wasn't about how you were made. He said, "It's about what happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes. When you are Real you don't mind being hurt. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or who have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose joints and very shabby."

One day, the nurse selected the Velveteen Rabbit for the boy's bedtime toy. At first, the Boy just slept on the rabbit, but after a while the Boy talked to him, and made tunnels under the blankets. After they played together, the rabbit would snuggle down and sleep with him. As time went on, the rabbit's fur got shabby, and the pink color rubbed off his nose, but he didn't notice because he was so happy. They played outdoors, too, with rides and picnics and many adventures. What the little rabbit liked the best, though, was that the Boy told him he was real.

Then the Boy got very, very sick. He had a high fever for a long time. He was too sick to play or do anything, but the Velveteen Rabbit stayed to guard him night and day. This story was written back in 1922, before antibiotics. When children got scarlet fever, it was very serious. They often died. So prudent parents did all that they could. When the boy got better, his room needed to be disinfected. Everything that he had played with was gathered up into a sack to be burnt, and this included the Velveteen Rabbit. But the gardener was too busy to get to it until the next morning.

That night the Rabbit lay among the old picture books and sheets behind the garden, feeling very lonely. He remembered all the love and happiness he'd shared with the Boy, and that wonderful day the Boy had told him he was real. As he remembered, a real tear trickled down his little shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground. That tear grew into a mysterious flower. When it opened, out stepped the loveliest fairy, who picked him up, kissed away his tears, and explained that she was the nursery magic Fairy who took the old and worn out toys that children

had loved, and made them Real forever. She carried him to where other real rabbits were dancing in the moonlight, to live with them forever and ever. He was a Real Rabbit at last.

How do we know what to keep and what to throw away? Even though the Velveteen Rabbit gave his whole self to the little Boy, there couldn't have been a better reason to burn it than to protect the Boy after his recovery from scarlet fever. And yet the greatest transformation, the most magical gift of love, didn't come until after that.

Like rotting grapes that become wine, barren fig trees, worn-out infected toys, and even people in the depths of hostility, hopelessness, or despair can undergo the most unlikely transformations. These are gifts of wholeness, gifts of the spirit. They are mysterious – we can't make them happen by an act of will – we couldn't do it even if we knew how.

We all long to bear the fruit of wholeness. In ordinary life productivity is often measured by financial income or material output. We earn so much money or produce so many figs. But the figs of the parable are figurative; they refer to the fruits of the human spirit, of the flowering that makes us useful to ourselves and those around us. In Biblical terms, the fruit of the human spirit is kindness, compassion, and love. And the conditions that lead to its production are often paradoxically unlikely.

In the parable, what does Jesus tell us the gardener might do to encourage productivity? Put some manure on it. This sounds to us like a reasonable suggestion for fertilizer, but nice people didn't talk like this back then. Manure was unclean. Farmers may have used it after composting it into the soil, but they didn't touch it if they could avoid it, and they certainly didn't talk about it. Like the contaminated Velveteen Rabbit, it was considered dangerous. Jesus' suggestion that something good could come out of manure made as little sense in his time as saving a scarlet fever-infested stuffed animal would have in 1922.

What good could come out of manure? Why did Jesus say this? Maybe because he was trying to tell us that holiness was connected to wholeness, that we need to value all of life – the nice and the not so nice – if we are to flower into our greatest spiritual potential. It's hard to do much work if we spend all our energy

trying to keep our hands clean. As the stuffed horse said, becoming real usually involves getting very, very shabby. And it's the shabby things that we often want to get rid of.

It's interesting to note that, in the parable of the fig tree, the fig tree needs fertilizer. So do we. We can't make ourselves spiritually whole by our own efforts. We can't make ourselves grow but, like the fig tree, we can take up the nutrients that are available. And these nutrients are not inside of us. They come from the outside: the love of our friends and family, the support of our spiritual community, the teachings of wisdom we inherit from those who have gone before. No matter how we conceive of the ultimate toward which we strive – transcendent, redeeming, mysterious, or rational – we need to want to grow. We have to take up the nutrients. We can't force God to make us whole any more than we can make the sun cause the plants in our garden to grow – but we can stop doing those things that keep growth from happening.

The fertilizer we need is the love, acceptance and compassion of those around us. The kindly fundraiser helped me to feel a little better about myself and the world. To be rejected for my lack of resources feels like cutting down my fig tree.

When we want to grow in wholeness, we can take up the nutrients of love that are in the soil around us. The parable of the fig tree tells us that the people around us are in need of those nutrients, too. It usually took three years for a tree to start bearing figs, so waiting another year is merely an act of faith. We can't know when the tree will be ready; we just keep caring for it. Even when it seems hopeless, we don't chop it down.

How many people seem hopeless to us? Who are the lost causes? Who have you given up on in your life?

What about the homeless, the impoverished, the addicts huddling together around a fire against the night's cold?

What about the criminals? The people who've broken the covenant that binds us together in a civil society?

What about the mean, the grouchy, the violent, the vindictive? Is it likely that we're going to get much good love out of them?

It's often tempting to look at them like the vineyard owner and say, "Cut them down." Close our hearts to them, cut them off from our love. They're a waste of our compassion and energy. Put something more useful in their place.

While there may be times when we need to protect ourselves from harm, I think that Jesus was telling us to suspend judgments like these. No matter how useless the person appears to us, we continue to give food, fertilizer, love, and wait until next year. And next year, we give the same second chance, over and over again. It's not for us to know when a tree will start to yield fruit, or when a person will rise from the squalor of life and give love. Even the derelicts huddled around a campfire are sharing the warmth of human community.

The most obviously vile and worthless things can be the recipients of the gift of wholeness that turns them into the greatest blessings. Lazarus had been dead three days – what's more hopeless than that? And yet he was still brought back to life. The Velveteen Rabbit was worn out and hopelessly contaminated: what an unlikely candidate for the gift of Real life!

The point is that we can't tell, we can't know, so we keep fertilizing. Our job is to keep giving – giving hope, care, compassion and love. We give them especially to those who may seem unworthy; they're the ones who need it the most. That's how we tend the trees in our human vineyard.