

“The Garden of Second Chances”

Psalm 80:7-15; Luke 13:6-9 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might really and truly live as though we believe in your abundant grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

How much do you think about metaphors? I remember learning about metaphors in school, as a part of writing class. It was the same unit when we learned about the subset of metaphors called similes. A metaphor is when something is compared to something else that it isn't, and a simile is when that comparison uses the words “like” or “as”. “She was as lovely as a summer day,” for instance would be a simile. But “her enthusiasm was sunshine on a cloudy day” is just a metaphor.

What I don't remember them teaching us in writing class though is how powerful metaphors can be and how their greatest influence isn't in writing, but in shaping the way we understand the world and everything in it, including our faith. Scripture is full of metaphors. Jesus did practically all of his teaching using extended metaphors, which we normally call parables. Our gospel passage today is one example. But there are other metaphors that we don't even think about directly that shape our faith in ways we may not even notice. So today I want to compare some of those metaphors to the ones our scripture lessons offer us and invite us to become more intentional about cultivating the metaphors that truly help sustain a faith of love and liberation, rather than one of fear and failure.

So first of all, let's name the metaphor that isn't in our scriptures today but lurks in the back of many of our minds most of the time. Think about the stereotypical image of God that ends up in cartoons and such. It's a man, right? And he's got long, white hair, and a long, white beard. And this figure is assumed to live up in the clouds and to be watching our every move, right? And the main focus of this image or metaphor for God is that we're being judged and we'll be punished when we mess up. This is the god people are referring to when you invite them to church, and they insist the building would be struck by lightning if they walked in the door. It's the smiting god, the angry dad god. But is this the Christian God?

Certainly there are passages of scripture that lean into this metaphor. The lightning bolt thing seems more connected to Zeus to me though. And our scripture lessons today remind us that the God of the Bible is way more than this particular metaphor, despite its outsize influence on our image of the Divine. What happens when we narrow our image of God to this angry, punishing caricature? I'm not sure we even realize it, but it affects how we relate to God, and it affects how we relate to one another. When we have an underlying assumption about God being focused on punishment rather than mercy, it makes us harder on ourselves. We give our mistakes way too much space in our brains, and we punish ourselves, if only mentally, when we fail to live up to the standards we've set for ourselves. But seeing God as judging rather than merciful also impacts how we treat others. We are less likely to give anyone the benefit of the doubt and much less likely to forgive.

It's not a pretty picture, the world that only has this image for God. Blessedly, that isn't the world the Bible offers us. The Bible is full of different metaphors for God and how God works. The passages we heard this morning offer us just one that is worth considering, especially because of how it might guide us to live together as fellow children of God. In Psalm 80, the metaphor is a vine, presumably a grape vine, representing the people of Israel. Things have gone wrong, and so the Israelites are crying out to God for help, reminding God of how they, "the stock your right hand planted," were specially cultivated and flourished; except now, it seems like the garden walls have been knocked down and wild animals are eating all the fruit. Despite the dire situation, there is an assumption that God can and will rectify things, because of God's abiding love for the children of Israel. The thing about metaphors involving plants, you see, is that it's almost always possible to revive plants and thus hope.

That's also what we see happening in the verses we read from Luke. I love this little parable. Part of what I like about it is what it pushes us to assume about the backstory and the next chapter. First of all, the man who owned the vineyard doesn't seem to know much about fig trees. Jesus doesn't say he planted that tree; he says the man had it planted. Someone else, presumably someone who knew a lot more about growing figs, planted that tree. But the man is impatient. So he keeps coming to check. It seems like this same conversation was held a year ago, when the tree was two years old, and the year before that, when it had only been in the ground for a year. But don't you think it's just as likely that the conversation will be held again in

another year? Yes, the gardener said if the tree hadn't borne fruit in another year, they would cut it down. But what the gardener knows but hasn't told the vineyard owner, is that fig trees can take up to five years to bear fruit, under normal circumstances. So to my mind, there's no way the gardener is going to cut that tree down next year. He's going to keep giving that tree what it needs to thrive, praying for the right amount of rain at the right times, and adding manure as needed. And despite his impatience, the vineyard owner is going to let him keep trying, because deep down, he knows the gardener knows more about growing fig trees than he does.

One of the best things about these extended metaphors called parables is that frequently, we are all the characters in them at the same time. We are the fig tree. We are also the owner of the vineyard. And we can choose to be the gardener, if we lean deeply enough into the merciful nature of God. How could life be different if this patient gardener image replaced that angry judge god that lurks in the back of our minds? What if we could believe that whenever we mess up, God's response is to care for us more diligently, rather than chop us down? What if, when things go wrong, we trusted that God was the one arguing for us to get another chance, instead of the one laying out ultimatums? What does it feel like in your shoulders and your gut to sit with that metaphor for God for a moment?

Now let's expand the impact. How could we treat one another better if this was our primary image of God? What would it look like to take up for someone when they've made a mistake? How could we offer help instead of judgment when

someone fails to meet expectations? What if all of us gave each other the benefit of the doubt and pressed for second chances when things didn't go well? Three years, four years, five years – how long is that gardener going to keep adding manure? As long as it takes, I imagine, or at least long enough for the fig tree to grow into a great climbing tree, so the owner's kids won't let him cut it down even if it never bears fruit. What if we could be nurturing gardeners for one another's fig trees? For our family members, for our friends, even for the strangers out there in the world making stupid mistakes and malicious errors. The manure may be different for each person's situation, but if we committed ourselves to bringing nourishing fertilizer instead of a chain saw into any given situation, all of us would be better off.

It's so important to name and claim the metaphors that are shaping our faith. What if our church could work toward being known as a “Garden of Second Chances?” What blessings might blossom? Whose life might be saved? Vista La Mesa Christian Church can be a place where we proclaim the glory of God the Patient Gardener, so that all may flourish. This can be a place where second chances are poured out like coffee. This can be a place where delicate vines are tended and fruitless trees are coaxed into bearing. Metaphors of mercy abound in scripture. Let us read them, live them, delight in them, and share them. Hallelujah and Amen!