

Be Compassionate Anyway
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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12:40

When I was in high school our senior high youth group went on a mission trip to Philadelphia—we stayed at a UCC church right up the street from the Liberty Bell and spent most of our week serving in soup kitchens and homeless shelters around the city. One evening most of us were outside playing basketball at the church and a man walked up to the playground and asked to see the pastor. One of the guys ran inside to get our pastor Jonathan who escorted the man into the church. Jonathan and the man eventually came back outside, got into one of the vans, and drove off. When Jonathan returned he seemed upset, it looked like he was really wrestling with something and was quiet at dinner.

Every night we had what we called simply Candle, we would sit on the floor in a circle and have a lit candle in a darkened room to represent the light of Christ among us. We would go around the circle and share what the day had been like, what we learned and experienced. That night Jonathan told us that the man we saw earlier came to church to get financial help to get home to his family. There was a death in the family, he had no money, and he asked for Jonathan to give him \$100 for a bus ticket to Detroit.

Jonathan said he would help this man and drove him to the bus station, though it was a one-way street and he couldn't find any parking. He was holding up traffic but pulled the van over as best he could, put the \$100 in this man's hand, and said, "I'm trusting that you will go into that bus station and use this money to buy a ticket to get home to Detroit. May God's blessings be with you on your journey." Jonathan had to drive off and kept looking in the rearview mirror and saw the man walk up the street, around a corner, and disappear.

That night at Candle my pastor looked around at all of us and quietly said, "It would appear that this man lied, that he didn't need the money for a ticket home to be with his grieving family. If I had known this would happen, should I have refused to help him? Or should I have given him the money anyway?"

I won't tell you the response of my high school youth group, I leave that question to you today. But it's a good question. Should Jonathan have refused to help this man knowing that he might be taken advantage of? Or should he have shown the man compassion regardless? In some ways, this is the question we are confronted with in the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree Jim read for us today.

The story is quite simple. There's a fig tree in a vineyard and for three years it doesn't bear any fruit. It's wasting space, precious resources, and seems to be completely unproductive. The vineyard owner tells the caretaker, "Cut it down; why should it use up the soil?"^[1] It might be an economic loss for the owner, fig trees didn't come cheap after all, but at least this worthless fig tree would be out of his sight and mind and he could use the space to plant something better and fruitful.

But the caretaker of the vineyard intervenes, "Leave it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."^[2] The caretaker asks for one more year, one more chance, maybe if I care for this tree even more than I already have been, it will bear some fruit after all. Just give me and this tree one more chance, don't give up on us yet.

Biblical scholar Arland Hultgren points out that applying fertilizer to a fig tree would have been highly unusual, "a sign of extraordinary care for the tree."^[3] And that's what the caretaker asks for; let me go the extra mile to care for this tree and see if my attention and love will make a difference. Hultgren further relates that the two figures in this parable—the owner and the caretaker represent the two sides of God—"judgment and mercy, clothed here in parabolic form."^[4] It shows how God must sometimes wrestle with barren fig trees, to cut them down or to love them that much more so they will bear fruit after all. And maybe this is the struggle that God sometimes has with all of us.

I also don't think that wrestling with mercy and judgment is unique to God—in some ways it's the heart of the question Jonathan posed to my youth group all those years ago. Should he not have helped that man, given up on him, cut him down? Or should he have taken the compassionate route hoping that the man would bear fruit with extra love and care he could provide?

Later that same night Jonathan said to us that maybe one day that man would realize the error of his ways. Maybe one day he would realize that he needs God in his life and that realization would fundamentally change him for the better. Maybe one day he would remember that a Christian pastor once showed him compassion when he needed it, no matter what he spent that money on. Maybe one day he would realize that God will always reach out to him no matter what and that God's love is unconditional. We pastors can sometimes be overly compassionate, sentimental, optimistic types in this world—just a hazard of the vocation I suppose. Some of you may be thinking that it's really quite naïve to give the man that much credit.

But maybe Jonathan was right, that in this instance showing compassion was the right thing to do, even if it wasn't the wisest thing to do. Forgiving the man and showing mercy after he had been wronged for all of my youth group to see even that night was also the right thing to do.

And maybe we take it a step further. In *Speaking Christian* Marcus Borg argues over the usage of the words mercy vs. compassion. He makes the case that mercy implies that we should forgive people who have offended us just as God forgives us. But that for many of us, mercy seems like too narrow a word or concept. Maybe to get the heart of what we mean in this parable or even in Christianity, we should be compassionate as God is compassionate. Borg writes, "Mercy is a reactive virtue; we are called to be merciful on those occasions when we have been wronged. Compassion covers a much larger area of life, indeed, all of life; we are to be compassionate."^[5] And I would argue that Jonathan showed both virtues, by being compassionate in the first place and merciful after he had been wronged—for me this was a powerful Christian model at an incredibly formative time of my faith development.

It reminds me of how I felt after reading an article in the *Christian Century* a few months back where pastors and theologians were asked to submit what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is in seven words or less. If you had to explain the entire Gospel message in a few words, what would you say? Craig Barnes said, "We live by grace." Donald Shriver said, "Divinely persistent, God really loves us." Mary Karr said, "We are the church of infinite chances." Martin Marty said, "God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow." Brian McLaren said, "In Christ, God calls all to reconciliation."^[6] Words like grace, persistence, love, infinite chances, welcome, and reconciliation are the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We see this today even in the midst of this difficult parable of the Barren Fig Tree.

In Luke's version of this parable, as much as it's about a call to repentance and judgment in case that repentance doesn't happen, it's just as much about a second chance. It's about God welcoming us anyhow, calling for reconciliation, offering grace, and divinely persistent in God's love and care for us. It's a call for all of us to really understand this message too. It's a call for

us to offer mercy when we have been wronged and compassion all the time, to our families, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors, our fellow church members whomever. Even if part of us wants to chop that barren fig tree down, something about this call effectively stays our hand, makes us pause and consider a different way of being in this life. And isn't this what the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the way we are supposed to live our lives every day is all about? Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Luke 13:7.

[2] Luke 13:8.

[3] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, 244.

[4] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, 245.

[5] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power and How They Can Be Restored*, 130.

[6] "The Gospel in Seven Words," *The Christian Century*, September 5, 2012, <http://www.christiancentury.org/nodequeue/10>