

New Year's Eve C 2021
Luke 13:6-9
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God the everlasting: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Through all the ups and downs, mountains and valleys, joys and sorrows, victories and defeats, good days and bad days, God has blessed us to see one more year.

Then he told this parable: "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.'" Let's pray...

I wonder what your New Year's resolution might be? What do you intend to improve, change, or institute in 2022? Does it have something to do with health, exercise, diet, sleep, finances, contacting friends and family? Maybe you're like me and have given up on chasing the wind. Maybe you need just one more year and you'll see your best laid plans bear fruit.

Tonight, our gospel gives us a great opportunity to hear once again, that despite our capacity for great inertia and falling hopelessly short of fulfilling any resolution, God is a God of infinite generosity, forgiveness, and love.

As you listen to this parable of Jesus, it can be hard to find any good news in it. It talks about a landowner, who comes looking for fruit on a tree for three years, but never finds any. Consequently, he tells the caretaker of the vineyard to cut it down. After an impassioned plea from the caretaker for more time, we hear the ominous words, "If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down." Where's the good news in that? Where's the gospel?

The secret to unravelling the mystery of parables is to understand who the actors are in the drama. Think about it this way. The owner took special care to place this particular tree in his vineyard. He chose this tree and carefully planted it there. Does that sound familiar? It reminds me that God chose you, before the creation of the world, to be his own. He wanted you to be a part of his kingdom. And this would have been impossible, because we are all born guilty, sinners when our mothers conceived us (Psalm 51:5). Hence, we don't deserve to be in God's kingdom, bearing fruit.

And yet, it's important to remember that our rescue plan was also conceived before the creation of the world, and Jesus, whose birth we again celebrated a week ago, came down from heaven to earth to purchase us. The ransom was steep and we see how much Jesus was willing to pay for us, each time we contemplate the cross. Every single sin that you and I have ever committed or will commit was all paid for by the innocent suffering and death of Jesus. This is what God was willing to pay for us. This is the true meaning of love.

God's love reached out and brought us to faith. That's when he planted us in his vineyard, with the purpose of us producing the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, against which there's no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

Sadly, sometimes we don't even flower, and at other times, although we may flower, we don't always produce fruit. The winds of change, trial, and temptation blow us off course, and leave us bare. Satan rails against us, trying to strip us bare of faith, hope, and love, like the recent hail storm stripped the vines of their leaves. Nothing for it then, but to cut down the tree and throw it into the fire.

However, and this is the crucial however, we again see the love of God, as the caretaker pleads on behalf of that tree. This fig tree is special to the caretaker. Everything in him rejects the thought of cutting it down. He intercedes on the tree's behalf, seeking permission to dig around the tree, fertilize, and tend it. He'll give that tree every chance to produce fruit.

The caretaker is Jesus. He continues to plead for us. [1 John 2:1] tells us that “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” When we sin, Jesus pleads our case before the Father. He reminds the Father that he forgives not seven times but seventy times seven. He is the God of eternal forgiveness and love, for his Beloved Son’s sake, who digs around us, loosening up the hard soil of our hearts to allow his life-giving and life-sustaining gospel to pour in and give us life. Through Jesus, God strengthens us so that we can be trees that produce a bumper crop of fruit that is pleasing to him and beneficial to others.

So, rather than receiving this parable as a harsh word of warning and judgement, hear and know that Jesus bears with us, graciously pruning, reshaping, nourishing, and wooing us to sprout, flower, and bear the fruit of his glory. Our loving caretaker, Jesus, continues to live in us, working in our daily lives, tenderly cultivating our hearts that love may flourish.

So, this New Year’s Eve, rather than striking out with the best intentions to make and become slaves to impossible resolutions to make yourselves better, let’s remember the resolution that our Creator made, “In the beginning... to make us in his image... and see that everything that he makes is indeed, very good” (Genesis 1), because Jesus has done all things necessary for our salvation. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds, as you flourish in Christ Jesus. Amen.