

Theme: "Let It Alone This Year Also"

Text: Luke 13:6-9 (ESV)

⁶ And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ Jesus, who have come seeking forgiveness for the year now ended and His mercy and blessing for the year now begun,

Horticulture. Could there be a better topic to discuss on New Year's Day than horticulture? Horticulture is defined as the science, technology, and business involved in intensive plant cultivation for human use. Basically, it's a fancy word for gardening. It can be as simple as the average gardener caring for their tomato plants or as complex as cross-breeding a plum with an apricot to produce a "plu-ot." Horticulturists work hard to ensure that the plants they care for are fruitful.

We hear of a couple of horticulturists in our text for this New Year's Day. One is the owner a vineyard. He owns the land and the plants growing in it. He primarily uses the land to grow grapevines. But at one open spot in his vineyard he decided that he might enjoy having a fig tree. After waiting years for his tree to first mature, the owner of the vineyard went to that tree expecting to find figs that he could enjoy—something he should have been able to find three times a year, yet he found none, not even one. So he waited another year, and another. Finally, after three years of finding no fruit at all on this tree, he is determined to cut it down. This unfruitful tree was wasting perfectly good soil where the owner could plant something else.

The other horticulturist in our text is the vinedresser. This man was hired by the owner of the vineyard to take care of his plants. He was responsible for overseeing the weeding, pruning, and harvesting of the grapevines. He cares about this tree too. When the owner threatens to cut down this tree, he asks the owner for one more year. One more year to work the soil around the fruitless fig tree. One more year to put manure or fertilizer at the base of the tree. His hope was that by working the soil and spreading that nutrient rich manure at the base of the tree, it would begin producing figs for the owner. "***But if not,***" the vinedresser said, "***you can cut it down.***" Thus the vinedresser asks for another year.

As we look back on 2016 and look ahead to 2017, this discussion of horticulture—of plant care—has much to say to us. With this earthly story, Jesus wishes to impress on us a spiritual, heavenly truth. Let us examine and apply these words to our life, as we hear the vinedresser's plea, "***Let it alone this year also.***" May God the Holy Spirit work in us through His holy word.

THE FRUIT THE OWNER SOUGHT

While Jesus never spells out for us the meaning of this parable, it is pretty clear what is meant. God Himself is the Owner of the vineyard. And in His vineyard, He planted a tree. A tree that rightly didn't belong—a fig tree in amidst grapevines. A tree that He expected to find fruit on, but which year after year was barren.

The immediate application of this would be Jerusalem and Israel. God planted Israel as His special tree and cared a great deal for it. He brought it up out of slavery in Egypt. He planted it in the Promised Land of Canaan—a land flowing with milk and honey. A land where there were already homes to live in and vineyards to harvest from. He gave them His law and made them His people. He defended them and protected them from their enemies, often times in miraculous ways.

Yet again and again, the LORD came seeking fruit from His special tree, but found none. Rather than giving Him all the honor and glory, rather than worshiping only Him, Israel turned to the false gods of the world. Rather than being faithful to Him and His covenant, Israel played the spiritual harlot. The LORD sought fruits of faith, but found none and, thus, is ready to cut it down because it is wasting His space.

But we dare not limit our parable to just Israel and Jerusalem. Jesus is speaking to every Christian of every era. He is speaking to us today also. We are that fig tree. And what rich soil He planted us in! We live in a land where the government does not interfere or inhibit our worship. Every Sunday, the Gospel can be heard from the pulpits of our CLC churches as the Means of Grace are regularly administered. He provided many faithful Sunday School teachers who told our children about Him and their Savior Jesus. In Minnesota and then Wisconsin, He planted a institution of higher learning—a Christian High School, College, and Seminary, where one can send our youth, confident that they would hear the Word of God and be strengthened in their faith.

And individually, what more could the Lord have done for us? This season we are reminded that He gave us His one and only Son to be our Savior. He heaped the ugliness of our sin on Jesus. He made Jesus pay the price for our lies, our hypocrisy, our lust, our cheating. Jesus became these sins and was punished in our place. He did this to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. He has given us His Word where He promises to nurture and strengthen our faith. He's given us Baptism and Lord's Supper, visible means connected with the Word of God to assure us and strengthen our faith. The Lord has indeed planted us in the good ground of His vineyard.

Now the Lord comes looking for fruit. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "***For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.***" (Eph 2:10) We are God's workmanship. He planted us in His vineyard. He made us His children. He created us in Christ Jesus, as Christ-believers, for good works. That is the fruit God is looking for. The fruits of joy, peace, thanksgiving, and love. The fruit of loving Him who loved us first. The fruit of loving our neighbor, our brothers and sisters, and even our enemies. He looks for fruits of faith that bring glory to His name as our Savior God.

The Lord came looking for fruit, but what has He found? Looking over the past year, have we been fruit bearing believers or have we been taking up His precious soil? Have we been wasting the blessings of Word and Sacrament that God gives us? Have we, individually, been loveless? The Lord is walking in His garden looking for fruits of faith.

THE PLEAS OF THE VINEDRESSER

"Cut it down!" This command of the owner echoes in our guilty ears as we enter a new year. "Cut it down," he says, "Why should it use up the ground?" Church history shows us how the Lord did cut down those who wasted His the fertile soil of His love. Because He found no fruit in Jerusalem, it was cut down by the Romans—not one stone was left upon another.

Follow the planting of the Gospel throughout history. Where are the orthodox Ephesians, the faithful Romans, the devote Lutherans in Germany? Yes, figs were found here and there, like righteous Lot in Sodom, but by-in-large those fruitless trees have been cut down.

But this cutting-down did not come swiftly. The Lord was patient and long suffering. He patiently came year after year seeking fruits of faith, only to find none. When He was ready to lay the axe to the root, we hear the plea of the vinedresser, “**Sir, let it alone this year also.**” The vinedresser wanted another opportunity. It seems that he was personally interested in seeing this fig tree produce fruit. He is willing to put in the time and effort to try one more time. “**Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.**”

Who else could this be, pleading for the tree, but our great High Priest, our Intercessor, Christ Jesus Himself. Christ is personally interested in the tree. He shed His blood and gave His life to purchase the tree for Himself. Like Moses, Christ stood in the breach and prevented the axe from swinging. Christ Himself went to Jerusalem and then He sent His apostles to Jerusalem. Only when He and His apostles were rejected and refused, did the axe swing. Only then was the tree chopped down.

Do we deserve to be cut down? Have we wasted God’s gracious soil? We must humbly confess that yes, we have. Yet the Lord our God is merciful, gracious, and long-suffering. Jesus is at the Father’s right hand speaking to Him on, “**Sir, let it alone this year also.**” He kept the law perfectly to be our righteousness. He shed His blood and died to purchase us. He is personally interested in our salvation. He gave “**Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.**” (Tit 2:4) Jesus Himself pleads for us, “**Sir, let it alone this year also.**”

THE WORK THAT HE MUST DO

While we rejoice that Jesus pleads for us, our new year prayer is that He would also work on us. “**Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.**” The vinedresser in the parable intends to work the soil and fertilize the ground around the tree. This is invasive and nurturing work. The hard soil is violently broken up by the spade or pitchfork. It is also nurturing work as the manure gives the fig tree nutrients that it may have been lacking. We pray Jesus would do this with us as well in our hearts.

The psalmist prayed for the same thing, “**Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.**” (Ps 139:23-24) Like a squirrel digging for nuts buried beneath the soil, so we pray that God would dig around in our heart to see if there is any wicked way in our heart. Find those secret sins that we don’t even realize we do. Find those sins that we have tried to hide from God or hide from someone else. We want Jesus to come with the sharp tongs of the pitchfork of His Law and dig around in our heart to expose our sin, that we might repent and turn away from those wicked ways.

Having exposed our sin, we pray that He would spread a thick layer of His fertilizer. We need Him to fertilize our faith with His Gospel love. Through the Gospel He soothes our wounded conscience and strengthens our faith.

As we enter this New Year, we look back confessing that we have all too often squandered and taken for granted the good soil of God’s love that He has planted us in. Yet we pray in this new year that Jesus would dig around the hard soil of our hearts and lead us to genuine repentance. Then we need Him to fertilize our faith with His amazing grace. As we enter a new year of God’s amazing grace, we rejoice to hear Jesus promise to us, “**He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit.**” (Jn 15:5) Even so, Lord Jesus, abide in us! Amen.

—Pastor Nathan J. Pfeiffer

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