

“Do You Have a Green Thumb?”

Luke 13:6-9

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
July 8, 2007

You don't see many of these in July. Poinsettias are associated with Christmas, not the middle of summer. I had to show you this one, though.

I received this poinsettia last December and put it in my office window. I watered and tended it for several weeks and noticed how well it was doing. Evidently the amount of light and air it got in that location was just what it needed. As weeks turned into months, it continued to grow and bloom. Here it is six months later looking as good as it did in the winter. My goal is to keep it blooming into the next holiday season, which by the way begins in a couple of months.

Naturally I thought of this poinsettia when I read today's text. It, however, is not a gardening success story, but a disappointing one. In this parable, Jesus told of a landowner that had a fig tree planted in a vineyard. Periodically he came looking for figs and found none, so he told the gardener to cut it down and not let it take up precious space any longer. After all, it had been three years since it was planted.

The vinedresser, on the other hand, pleaded for more time to work with it. “Sir, leave it alone for one more year and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down” Luke 13:8-9.

I wonder what happened? The story ends without telling us, which makes this parable more thought-provoking. Perhaps we must write the ending based upon our experiences.

How does this parable speak to me? It speaks in a variety of ways, but most of all I find it to be a story filled with grace and hope. The gospel will not let us give up on people that others are ready to discard, at least not without a fight.

Who do you know that needs extra attention? Who is testing your patience? Others may have already given up on them, and quite frankly, you have wanted to at times, but you just cannot do it. You are not ready to write them off and let them go.

Is this your son or daughter? Is it your grandchild? Perhaps it is your mate or a dear friend.

Why do they need extra attention, anyway? Perhaps they have been a disappointment much like Israel was to God. He called and blessed them so they could be a blessing to others and make Him known. They chose to bless themselves to death instead and ignore God's mission. They bore no spiritual fruit in spite of the fact that they were planted in fertile soil and well tended. They certainly did not live up to their potential or God's expectations.

Maybe you know someone that has not lived up to his or her potential. They might even be spiraling out of control, traveling down the road of destruction. Others have tried to help them but have now given up. You cannot do this, however. You may be their last hope to turn their life around and you know it. So, you pray for them and ask for more time to work with them.

What do they need from you? Encouragement? Affirmation? A mentor? Do they need someone that will believe in them? Perhaps they need someone that will speak the truth to them in love and steer them away from indifference, complacency or rebellion. Maybe they need you to hold them accountable for promises they have made.

Who is helping you as you reach out to them? Surely you are not trying to help them on your own. Who is helping you deal with your frustration, pain and disappointment? Who is recharging your batteries?

Is it God? Are you praying a lot? Have you turned to other family members, friends or a counselor? I hope so. I don't think you can do this alone, neither do I believe you have to do so.

By the way, why are you doing this? Do you feel led of God to reach out to them? Are you trying to be the presence of Christ in their life? Do you see great potential in them and believe they can turn it around? Do you love them unconditionally?

George Buttrick believed that the deepest level of love always involved sacrifice. He's right and you know it all too well. The gospel won't let us give up on people because love is willing to do the difficult. I'm glad. Where would some of us be if love were not so tenacious?

Who gave you extra attention? Who loved you unconditionally and refused to give up on you? Who believed in you when you no longer believed in yourself? Who navigated you through turbulent waters? Who was your patient gardener that nurtured and nourished you when you were at your lowest?

You are grateful, aren't you? I hope the person you are working with now will be one day. So does God.