

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

The Unfruitful Fig Tree

June 26, 2011

**Psalm 13 and Luke 13:6-9
(Hymns –281, 575, 590, 626)**

There is a rich mix of meanings
connected with fig trees in the Bible.
Fig trees are often entangled with grape vines
as a symbol for Israel.
Their robustness and health
is associated with peace and prosperity in the land,
just as their absence is associated with curse and punishment.
Vigorous fig trees and vines
are signs of the presence of the kingdom of God,
which is the focus of the teaching of most of the parables.
Unproductive plants and their removal
is indicative of failure and judgement.

The parable we read this morning –
with the gardener pleading successfully for more time to produce fruit –
blends effectively the importance of bearing fruit
and the consequences of not being productive.
It is a warning and a call to repentance
addressed to a general audience.
Luke is insistent that something is wrong,
that judgment is nigh,
and that something must be done to avoid destruction.

For Christians, that destruction was avoided
through what God did for the redemption of the world
in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.
That was God's decisive act of reconciliation with humanity,
the restoration of humanity's ability to be stewards of the creation
as God originally intended.
We have been given again the possibility
of being the blessings we are called to be
in God's covenants with human beings.

Our abilities to be productive in God's company and service are restored.

Our ways of seeing things from God's perspective are redeemed.

What I want to do this morning is to spend a bit of time reflecting with you on what productivity might mean for us, both as individuals and as a congregation.

I have a good friend who is involved in the Kindness Foundation, an organization founded here in Vancouver in 1998.

It's purpose is "to inspire human connections and activate the practice of kindness, to create a kind world one kind act at a time."

Supporters of the foundation often wear Kindness Counts bracelets.

When they commit an act of kindness, they move the bracelet from their left wrist to their right.

It's a reminder of, a way of drawing their attention to, the importance of intentional acts of kindness as a way of inspiring human connection in a fractured and fractious world.

For Christians, kindness flows from God's grace.

It is a response of gratitude for the gifts of grace offered in Jesus Christ's relationship with us.

It is in that relationship with Christ that we find our most basic needs as humans so fully met that we can be free to be grace for others.

What are those needs?

I think Thomas Keating, a leading thinker and practitioner in the art of contemplative prayer, has summarized them well:

safety and security,
esteem and affection, and
power and control.

He has concluded that human beings try to find these things in the wrong places when they are disconnected from the God who came in Jesus Christ.

It is in that God's protection, acceptance, and calling that we find our human needs best met.

It is the nurturing of God's grace in Christ through the work of the Spirit that makes us productive, that helps us flourish

as the stewards of creation God created and called us to be.

Perhaps we should develop a program around Grace Counts bracelets to help remind us to commit intentional acts of grace every day.

And that is what it means to be productive as a Christian – commit intentional acts of gracious blessing every day.

And what about Brentwood as a congregation?
What does it mean to be productive as a congregation?

Throughout the history of the Christian church,
it has meant five key things:

1. to be true to the **message**
2. of the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ;
3. to be faithful in **teaching** that message;
4. to be a loving **community**
in which people experience the fruits God's grace;
5. to **praise and pray** together in gratitude for God's grace; and
6. to **serve** as stewards of God's grace throughout all creation.

The New Testament Greek words for these marks of the church are
kerygma, didache, koinonia, liturgia, and diakonia.

These are the qualities of a community's work and witness
that feed it's health and flourishing.

They are, if you will, the manure-enriched soil
out of which a healthy, vibrant, viable congregation grows.

All of these things are happening well here at Brentwood,
and we can do all of them better.

It all begins with intentional acts of grace,
with being Jesus Christ to everyone we meet
in our busy lives.

A helping hand, a warm smile, a sincere welcome,
an invitation to join us at church
to enjoy the riches of grace by which we are nourished
here at Brentwood –
those are the intentional acts of grace
that will make us even more productive as a congregation
in the service of Christ's kingdom.

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