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# MATTERING

LUKE 13:1-9

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL  
ON ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2022,  
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

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“Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” Those are the words of a vineyard owner, a businessman, counting the cost of his investment, as he gazes at a bare tree. “For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down!” It’s a sad day for that tree. A sorrow fitting for the season of Lent because it is about to die as the owner thinks it doesn’t matter. New Testament scholar Matt Skinner tells us that the crisis of this parable is “a fig tree on a long fruitless streak.” And the owner, the economic strategist, is not happy and thinks that because of its fruitlessness, the fig tree has been a waste of time and soil.

There is something true and honest about this. Some things, some habits, some practices, some relationships, some programs, some organizations, need to die and end because they do not bear fruit. We can put in all the work, all the research, all the money, all the time and energy, all the years—three years for this vineyard owner—and still not see any fruit. Fruit is no guarantee in life—just ask a gardener. You plant Jane Magnolias and do everything by the agricultural book and still no real blossoms, no real fruit from the tree or your work.

But on the other hand, just because there’s no fruit, and the output is not what we wanted or expected, doesn’t mean it is not worth it, and it doesn’t matter, ‘it’ being the fig tree. I understand the expectations of the vineyard owner, but does something have to bear fruit for it to be of worth and valued, for it to matter? Can’t the tree matter because it is a tree and exists as part of God’s creation? Can’t it matter because it is matter?

The vineyard owner had had enough of this fruitless streak, but the gardener was of a different mindset. The gardener tells the owner, “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.” The owner had told the gardener to cut it down initially because that was his role as a gardener but in the gardener’s response to the owner, notice he tells the owner that *the owner* can cut it down if it doesn’t bear fruit—‘you can cut it down.’ The gardener doesn’t want to have anything to do with ending the life of this tree. He wants to give it another valiant try by digging and placing manure on it. He wants to give that tree another chance. Thus he never volunteers to cut it down because I contend that to the gardener, nothing is ever a waste, even without visible fruit to prove its worth and that it matters.

For the gardener, the fig tree matters because it is still present. It matters because it is matter. It is still alive. It is still a tree. It may not produce what was intended or hoped for, but it is not wasting the soil as the owner thinks. Just because tragedy hits the Galileans and those killed by the tower of Siloam doesn’t mean they mattered less than others or were worse than others. Their lives mattered no matter who they were or what they did or what they believed or what they produced because they lived. Their tragic deaths or the unjust killings of Ukrainian citizens does not speak of a lesser worth or committed sin or not mattering at all.

University of Miami professor Dr. Isaac Prilleltensky, former Dean of Education and Human Development and Vice Provost for Institutional Culture, does significant research on human mattering and its connection to personal and communal well-being. Check out his co-authored book *How People Matter*. He says, “feeling like we matter is one of the most defining features of our humanity. When that feeling is present, we thrive. When it is absent, we feel ignored and helpless.” When our mattering is threatened, our dignity diminishes. And he argues that mattering also “prevents personal devaluation, relational disconnection, disengagement from work, and disintegration of the social fabric.” When one matters like Jane Eyre (‘air’) in her new town in Charlotte Bronte’s novel, it’s like “sitting in sunshine, calm and sweet” without a threat against one’s life, unlike the fig tree.

But this fig tree matters to the gardener like we matter to God, the first gardener on earth. In Genesis, “the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden and there he put the man whom he had formed” (2:8). As Duke Divinity professor and Chapel congregation member Norman Wirzba says, in the beginning “God [was] on God’s knees in the

soil.” And if God touches the soil, anything in the soil, including a fruitless fig tree is not a waste. Fruit may not be born, but we still matter to God, the gardener, like the gardener in the parable. We may not produce the fruit God wants or as we should, but we still matter because we are more than what we produce.

God knows that gardening is not easy or always a happy enterprise. Who wants to be weeding in the middle of the hot North Carolina summers?! But even though the vineyard owner wants to give up on the fig tree, the gardener, God, does not. What if God, the gardener, was like the owner and gave up on the fig tree, and gave up on us and declared ‘cut it down’?

But God, the gardener, does not, because the fig tree matters. “‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.’” God is a patient divine gardener who believes in what is possible in and through us—our potential—so this gardener piles on the manure, which is why we sometimes smell like sheep. The manure is the means to the majesty of fruit. Yet the fruit may not be born but the manure keeps flowing and the gardener keeps digging and trying and working with us, because we matter to God. You matter to God.

And God is long suffering, patient, with what is planted in the soil of life because love is patient. Lent is technically only 40 days, but these last 2 years have been like one long Lent. The fig tree was in a 3-year Lent but there, like God, was the gardener waiting and working with the tree in the wilderness during a fruitless streak. And there was Jesus, after talking about the fig tree, encountering a woman, crippled and bent over during her 18-year Lent, well past 3 years; she had suffered so long for 18 years and I’m sure there were those who thought she should be cut down. But Jesus heals her, rather than seeking to destroy or quarantine sick or disabled individuals, because no one or nothing is a waste when it comes to God. Not a tree or a person or even the tiny mustard seed Jesus mentions after healing the crippled woman because it all matters in God’s economy.

This is why the patient gardener God declares, ‘Give it one more year. I’m not giving up on that tree. I’m not giving up on you. Others might. Let’s try one more phone call. Let’s try one more intervention. Let’s try one more therapy session. Let’s try one more gym workout. Let’s try one more surgery. Let’s try one more attempt at reconciliation and healing. Let’s try one more attempt at peace talks. I’m not giving up on you.’

When Oprah Winfrey received the first Bob Hope Humanitarian Award at the Emmys in 2003, she spoke of her father. Her father owned a barber shop and “Every holiday [she said] all the transients were always bumming haircuts from my father and asking for money from my dad. All those guys always ended up at our dinner table. I would often say to my father afterwards, “Dad, why can’t we just have regular people at our Christmas dinner?” My father said to me, “They are regular people. They want the same thing you want.” And I would say, “What?” And he said, “To be fed.” At the time I thought he was just talking about dinner, but I have since learned how profound he really was because we are all regular people seeing the same thing. We all just want to know that we matter.”

That fig tree mattered so the gardener kept feeding it with manure. And you matter too. Don’t give up even if you are on a fruitless streak and others want to cut you down. God, the gardener, hasn’t given up on you. Listen for God’s whisper of hope: one more year.