
THE POTENTIALITY OF PROXIMITY

LUKE 13:1-9

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I want to talk about proximity in an age of growing remoteness. We may think that in this globalized world, we are more connected, and perhaps this is true—there are more connections. But that doesn't mean there are more meaningful relationships. That doesn't mean we are closer than before. When we endured the COVID health pandemic, it's noteworthy that the term used for keeping physical distance was "social distancing." If there wasn't much distance before the pandemic, there is surely more 'social distance' now and that means more than physical distance. And although certain business sectors of society were already used to 'remote work' for employees before the pandemic, being remote for work is more prevalent now in practice. Some are fully remote in their jobs; others are in a hybrid work schedule with some days in the office and other days 'remote.' 'Social distance.' 'Remote.' This has become more than a way of working; it has become a way of living and being.

I wrote a poem during the pandemic entitled "Space" where I say:

*Pandemics.
Social
Distance.
We are far away
From each other
Yet
Launch into space
Far away
At distance.
Closer to technology
Than one another.
Technology
Outpacing
Our humanity.
We like distances.
Far away ones.
Go to space and
Not make space
For each other.
This is
Pandemonium.*

'Pandemonium' is a word reserved for the name of the capital of hell in John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost." When we are 'far away at distance' from one another, all hell can break loose. Isn't that what happened in the parable of the fig tree?

"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 man working the vineyard, '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.'"

Notice that it is the owner of the vineyard—not the gardener, the man working the vineyard—who wants to cut down the fruitless fig tree. The owner is no longer patient with the tree after three years. Perhaps this isn't

surprising because the owner is at a distance from the tree, unlike the gardener who tends the tree tenderly. And when one is at a distance, far away from a person, place or thing (like a tree), it's too easy to demonize what or who you don't know, judge it, and perhaps even desire to "cut it down." Distance can do that—make us indifferent or create a desire to destroy. The owner views the tree as disposable because he has no relationship with it. He's not close; he's not in proximity to it.

He doesn't know the tree's aspirations or struggles, what it's been through in life, what its' family history is, whether it cheers for Duke or unwisely roots for Carolina. He doesn't know what's gotten in the way of the tree producing fruit. But the owner isn't close enough to care, so the tree seems disposable even though he doesn't know its circumstances. He only sees it on Facebook or Instagram or on the nightly news, from afar and not up close, so it's easy—because he's not in relationship with it, not close to it—to cut it down, to cut it off, to defriend it, to deport it, to imprison it, to defund it, because he isn't close to it or its situation. If you don't know any Galileans who suffered and died tragically or the eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed as Jesus mentioned, you may not truly care because you're at distance from them and their situation. But if they were your daughters, your sons, your spouses, your cousins, your classmates, your teammates, your friends, who tragically died, I bet it would make a difference because you'd be closer to them, rather than at a social distance.

Proximity isn't a magic wand but there is great potential in it. Proximity opens up the potentiality for greater empathy. Remoteness doesn't have to reign in our day, even if it does in our workplaces. Maybe we need to press into proximity more like the gardener because it can make the difference, like it did for the tree. Unlike the owner, the gardener was close to the fig tree. He tended it. He cared for it. He pruned it. He watered it. He talked to it. He sung to it (perhaps!). And he's the one who asks the owner to give the tree another chance—"let it alone for one more year." The gardener, the one who spent all his time and energy in the vineyard, asks for mercy for the fig tree and desires to keep working with it in an attempt to have it bear fruit. His proximity to the tree causes him to see its potential and its value. He's close enough to care. And when you're close enough to immigrants and refugees and close enough to the homeless and close enough to prisoners and close enough to malnourished children, it makes a difference in how we act and think and how we see the world. When you know a tree in a predicament like the fig tree, you might be more willing to say, "one more year," despite the calls to "cut it down" or the accusations that it's just a waste.

But is it ever a waste to save a living thing? Those in power may think that something is deserving of destruction because it doesn't produce anything and thus it isn't worthy because productivity is thought to be the measure of one's worth, and so we embrace the false narrative that we are human doings rather than human beings. A fig tree is supposed to produce figs and if it doesn't, 'cut it down.' But the gardener says "one more year" because he cares enough to commit to more time for and with the tree, with or without figs. He's willing to dig around it and put more manure on it for the potential of fruit. He's willing to do what he has to do in order to save it. What drives him is that he sees the worth of the tree for just being a tree. Even without production, the tree is still alive and has worth, so why cut down a living thing, a breathing tree? Why cut down a human being in the streets of Durham or over in Israel and Gaza or Ukraine and Russia? Is a tree unworthy if it doesn't bear fruit? Do we need to produce fruit to be worthy to live?

The tree was alive even though it didn't produce figs, and the gardener understood this. In the story after this parable, there's a woman crippled and bent over for eighteen years. In that ancient society she would have been deemed unworthy as a woman and cripple. And because she wasn't a man or fully abled there would have been people in her town saying, 'cut her down.' But Jesus lays hands on her and heals her because she's worthy.

He gets close to her, resisting ancient social mores and 'social distance,' and that makes all the difference. When you don't know people and aren't proximate to them and their pain, you may judge or become indifferent to them and think they aren't worth it so they can be cut down like a tree. But what if God did that to us and never came close?

But the good news is that God got close to us, as close as our human flesh, to heal us, to save us, to set us free, to give us one more chance, one more year, to bring us into the fullness of life with God, to show us that we're not wasting the soil nor is our life a waste. But rather, we are worthy as God's creation. You are worthy—worthy of care, worthy of time, worthy of love, worthy of another opportunity to live on, no matter what others may say about you because of who you are or what you've done. You are worthy. In God's garden, alone,

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*While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.*

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

*He speaks, and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing;
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.*

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own....*

You are his own no matter who you are or what you've done. I hear Jesus calling out to you with the Cameron Craziest, "one more year!" Don't cut your life short. One more year. Don't give up on your dreams. One more year. You have worth. One more year. Come to me ye weary! One more year. Give me your sickness. One more year. Give me all your sorrow. One more year. I will give blessing. One more year. One more year.