

FIG-URE IT

When I proudly told Leslie the title and its meaning for today's sermon, she paused and then responded, "That's not funny."

I retorted, "It's not suppose to be funny, but once I tell people what it means, it should prompt a smile or a grin."

She replied, "Oh, you may get a sympathetic smirk."

Sometimes, we see only what we want to see, and ignore the rest, and likewise, sometimes things are Not as grand and appealing in the end, as they are at first glance.

For example, some retailers advertize, "Buy now pay later; no payment for a year." That offer seems like a good thing.

However, that "year" does go by, and then the deal doesn't seem so great.

Back in the 1980s, people were told that large private, for profit companies were more efficient and that if the rich were enticed to get richer, then it would stimulate the economy and trickle down to everyone else.

On the surface, that sounded appealing, yet both assumptions have proven to be grossly overstated.

The opening words in the Isaiah text are very enticing, but that's just the beginning.

It states, food and drinks are free; God's buying, and not just the cheap stuff.

Verse 2 states, "Delight yourselves in rich food."

However, reading on suggests that God's people have to share their bounty with others.

I suppose that's not too bad, as long as God is picking up that tab.

Then, there are verses 6 and following.

No doubt, a slick marketer would put those verses in small print.

We do tend to regard uncomfortable parts in the Bible like the box we check that states we agree with the contract that we never read,...just so we can get what we want.

In all honesty, we often treat the Bible like a buffet potluck--we pick and choose what we like, and gloss over the rest,...or we give the tough meat to someone else.

This is illustrated by the elderly lady who shook hands with the pastor after the service one Sunday morning, and commented, "That was a wonderful sermon-- just wonderful. Everything you said applies to someone I know."

Here is the part that takes some chewing:

Verse 6 advises that it's a limited time offer, stating: "Seek the Lord while God may be found." I'm inclined to think that it is NOT God who drifts away....out of sight.

Verse 7 is some tough gristle about being welcoming and inviting to the unrighteous / to not create barriers for them,..... so that God can be merciful to them.

Too bad the eldest son, in next week's text, glossed over this part.

We tend to want, so called, "bad" people to suffer and be rejected.

And frequently, conditions are such that "undesirables" feel undesirable.

Then verses 8 and 9 puts us all in our place by reminding us that we are not so smart / we don't own the truth, nor really understand the ways of God.

I think "our truth" / what we assume to be truth is just a fraction of of the ultimate truth--God. We have much to learn.

Therefore, church needs to be a place to wrestle with questions and doubts, including adventuresome theology.

Hearing comforting, familiar words or sermons about what we already know and believe inwill not help us grow in truth or in faith.

Still,..... it sure would be nicer to only focus on the opening verses about free, yummy food.

The parable about the barren fig tree, that Jesus told in Luke 13, also contains a mix of tasty and bitter parts.

A man had a fig tree planted--the fig tree was there because of the man.

It was His vineyard. He owned it, and periodically checked production, too.

And, he was keenly aware a one problem tree--a tree that was Not bearing fruit.

Fig trees are an interest fruit tree, and so is the fruit --the fig.

The edible fig is one of the first plants that was cultivated by humans. Moreover, Figs are one of the highest plant sources of calcium and fiber. Dried figs are rich in fiber, copper, manganese, magnesium, potassium, calcium, and vitamin K, relative to human needs.

And, Figs can be eaten fresh or dried, and used in jam-making.

The tree itself, is significant in size. The common Fig tree grows to 25-35 feet highand as wide.

It takes up a lot of room and nourishment --resources.

In a way, fig trees are somewhat like humans.

The tree will shade out anything growing beneath it, and the roots are greedy, traveling far beyond the tree canopy--reaching out 50 feet and more from the trunk. They can tolerate drought, but will suck up lots of water when available.

Obviously, a fig tree that is not bearing fruit is occupying a lot of space, for no reason, and stealing resources from others.

So, bearing fruit is essential,.... for a number of reasons.

To be sure, the vineyard owner desires that his plants, at least give an equal return for the investment. It's the owner's prerogative, whether we like it or not, to judge the trees. It generally understood that the owner represents God. We like to think God plays by our rules, but as the Isaiah passage pointed out, we are not so wise, nor are we the keeper of God.

And, as mentioned, an unproductive fig tree is a drain on others and the environment in general.

However, there is a deeper reason for the necessity to bear fruit.

Fruit contains seed, and that means the survival of the species. One tree is not the whole world. It is part of a whole. The tree takes up space and resources for the sake of the future and for others to live--those who consume the fruit and the seeds that sprout. A selfish, unproductive fig tree is actually in the dying process, already. Real living is giving as much or more than we take in. That dynamic is in the way of God.

As Fredrick Buechner said,
To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake - even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death - that little by little we start to come alive.”

In the parable, the owner is ready to cut down the tree. The gardener intercedes, and begs for one more year....hoping he can stimulate the tree to start living / to bear fruit.

Most believe that the gardener represents Jesus.

The gardener will nurture, feed.....and I dare say, "digging around it" suggests the gardener plans to do some root pruning. Cutting off a few feeders--the roots--can shock a fruit tree into bearing fruit.

Sometimes, when a plant is stressed / encounters the reality of pending death--such as losing roots, it will instinctively bear fruit to ensure others will live. This doesn't always work,... but sometimes it does.

We'd prefer to focus on the aspect of a second chance / that God is merciful; however, like it or not,..... all things come to an end. And, that end comes sooner for those who are not living / for those who are self absorbed and not giving. To be sure, living is more than just the physical aspect.

The one year warning, is grace,.... but it also serves as a root pruning to wake up and start living.

This parable is capable of hooking us in various ways, thus the title:
Figure it..... which includes,.... Fig.... you are it.

Okay,..... it isn't such a great title. At first, I thought it was.....

Expanding on the ways this parable reaches us:

The fig / the fruit is part of the tree, and the fruit is not merely a pretty and generous act of benevolence. It is nourishing to others,.. and it gives new life.

There was a lady in the second church I pastored. She was matriarch in the church. As a very wealthy, widow, she enjoyed her influential role in the church.

True, she would periodically donate a large amount to the church. Usually, it was a designated donation for a particular cause.

Some would call that bearing fruit; however, she demanded far more than she gave. She rarely did anything else for others and the church, and insisted on being served with praise and frequent visits. I'm not so sure she was bearing fruit.

And, this brings out another aspect in this parable.

Maybe, we are the tree, the fruit, and maybe we are also to as Christ -- the gardener. I'm pretty sure we're not supposed to be like the owner.

We are fairly good at nourishing and encouraging, but.... the confrontational part of root pruning,....well..... we tend to avoid that part. So, we focus on the grace and mercy,.....and gentle nurturing, and.... hope for the best,..... and for more than one year, figuratively speaking.

But, what about the "wake up call" / the warning to get off your fanny and start giving more than taking. Who's doing that part?

And, don't expect the pastor to do that. Mennonite churches are not set up for that. Many Mennonite churches still have a popularity vote every three years, and root cutting does not gain votes.

So,..... how does that happen?

Moreover, if we selectively read the Bible, then the Bible doesn't make a worthy garden spade either.

Aside from relying on God's spirit to wake us up, I don't have a good answer for how we do the complete part of the gardener.

We'll have to figure that one out.

In the mean time, let us invite God's Spirit to use this passage to inspire each of us to do some introspection.

Are we bearing fruit?

Are we giving / enabling / returning..... more than we are taking?

In addition, a fruit tree and a gardener live in a complex world, a world that includes seasons.

There is a season to be dormant, a season to bud and branch out, a season to bear fruit and a season to take in and store up reserves.

There is no shame in being where God wants us to be, whatever season that is.

May God grant each of us the wisdom to figure out which season we are to be in and when that season ends.