

We have an unusual Gospel text before us this morning, which includes two distinct sections. The first section deals with the question of God's part in human suffering, a weighty theological issue. These initial verses explore the timeless and universal question of why people suffer. Two instances are held up of human suffering for Jesus' consideration in our text: the slaughter of fellow Galileans who had resisted Roman rule, and the random death of people who were crushed when a tower they stood near collapsed upon them. There was a prevalent belief in this 1st C. that people who suffered terrible misfortunes were being punished by God for their sin. We probably still tinker with this belief when we fall into blaming the victim of misfortune for their misfortune. Jesus makes short shrift of this approach. In essence he responds—"You think these people suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than you and deserved God's wrath and punishment? Not at all! Everyone is equally under sin's bondage and needs repentance. Their suffering is *not* a result of their sin; that's not how God works." It may be hard to tell, but when we think about it, we recognize that this text is good news for any of us when we are suffering. Our suffering is *not* a punishment from God for sin; it's part of the random nature of a fallen universe. We may like to picture a God of wrath, a God who smites sinners. But that's *not* the God presented to us in Scripture, and it's certainly not the God we encounter Incarnate in Christ. As the second section of our text demonstrates.

This second section, which is our primary focus this morning is also of considerable theological significance, but it deals, among other things, with manure. Something of which we do not speak that often in church. But this Parable of the Fig Tree is a favorite text of mine, manure and all, and in fact, I once used it as the sermon text for a wedding about 25 years ago, which might seem even more incongruous. Fig trees and manure may not seem to go with brides in white and lovely flower arrangements, but in some instances, it's actually a perfect match. I was performing a marriage for a couple in their 60s. One had been divorced for some years after a bitterly unhappy marriage. The other had lost their alcoholic spouse to cancer after a rocky marriage of many years. Each of these people had come to the unhappy belief that the particular joy that can be found in a happy marriage was lost to them forever. They had had their chance, they blew it, and now it was too

late. And then, in their 60s, they met. They fell in love. And they married. At their marriage, we used this text, because it's actually a text about second chances. And we all rejoiced that sometimes we are given a second chance at happiness.

Maybe it surprises us that this is a parable about second chances? But I think if we investigate more closely, we discover that it is. Remember that parables are a short story that use colorful, everyday scenarios to drive home a single point. Jesus was a master of parables, and fig trees and manure-compost and scarcity of land were all everyday realities for his 1st C. listeners in Palestine. Let's consider his story. It seems that in a particular vineyard there was a fig tree that had failed to produce fruit in three years. The owner of the vineyard was growing impatient; why should he waste space on this tree which was not producing? The gardener, though, pleads for the tree, asking that it be allowed one more year to grow. Moreover, not only should it be allowed this extra year, but it should receive some special attention, involving digging and the fertilizing of the soil with manure, in order to give it the best possible chance for bearing fruit the next season around. Which is why instead of being called the "Parable of the Fig Tree", this could be called "The Parable of the Second Chance." And actually more than one second chance, right? It's already been three years before the current second chance is offered. Here, though, is an essential point I'd like to make. We might assume in this parable that the owner of the vineyard is God the Father, and the gardener is Jesus, and the fig tree is us. But, Biblical scholars rightly point out that nowhere in the Gospel of Luke is God portrayed as an angry deity waiting to pronounce judgment and say it with thunderbolts. If anything, God is portrayed exactly the opposite: this is the Gospel including the parable of the prodigal son, where God is the Father who waits and forgives with excessive generosity. So, very likely, we should see this parable differently. Who actually is it that typically is all over the idea of *ownership*, whether it be property, animals, stuff, or in the worst case, other people? Who actually is it that tends to get impatient with and judgmental of others who seem to be not meeting arbitrary expectations? Well, that's *us*, isn't it? That's how *we* are! *We* resemble that remark! At least one level of understanding this parable is that we or the status quo about us are the owner. Notice also how concerned the owner is about how this unfruitful tree is wasting space. Now admittedly, arable land was scarce in 1st C.

Palestine, so we can understand the concern. But when we move into the metaphorical level of meaning, aren't we awfully quick to determine that someone or something is a waste? "Waste" pops up among our harshest judgements of other people---we say that they're a waste of space, a waste of breath, a waste of our time, a waste of our effort. How quick we are to determine that someone else is just not worth it anymore and to give up on them. Or maybe we are quick to determine that we *ourselves* are not worth the effort anymore, and we give up on ourselves. In these ways, we are very like the owner of the vineyard.

If we are the owner, Who, then, is the gardener, who *isn't* ready to give up? Well, Who is it who actually offers forgiveness and second chances throughout Scripture and our lives? Well, that's *God*, isn't it? Not just God in Christ, but God in totality. Our Lord is a Lord always ready to offer yet another chance. And if we find ourselves within this parable not *only* as the owner, but *also* as that underperforming fig tree, we have good reason to be grateful for this forgiving nature of God and those second chances.

Second chances are something we all need. Second chances are pretty much a necessity in this life, and we may need those second chances any number of times. My favorite example of second chances that I've probably mentioned before is a video game that my daughter and I liked to play when she was a teen ager: Nancy Drew, girl detective. We were horrified in such a game, when for the first time, we inadvertently killed off Nancy Drew. We didn't mean to let Nancy Drew drive off in that motor boat in pursuit of the villain without fixing the boat motor properly, but we did, and all of a sudden she's been blown to bits. Oops! Would we have to start the game all over, which would mean considerable hours of tedium? As it turned out, no. This game, like many such games, came with a Second Chance option on the menu. That's literally what it was called. You blow it? Then you hit the Second Chance option, and suddenly there you are in the same situation, before you blew up Nancy Drew. You now have the opportunity to fix the motor in the motorboat before she takes off in hot pursuit after the villain. You get a second chance.

This parable indicates to us, that if life was a video game, from the perspective of God, there is a second chance option. Isn't that a good thing? Isn't that the very essence of grace? We all need second chances from time to time. How many of us failed our driver's test the first time because we couldn't parallel park? We

needed a 2nd chance. How many of us have received a negative evaluation at work or had a bad year in our business? We needed a second chance. We often don't get things just right the first time around.

And let's focus in on relationships, where second chances are much needed. I began by giving a second marriage as an example of a second chance for happiness. And that's certainly the case for a number of couples. But whatever number marriage it may be, marriages provide lots of opportunities *within* themselves for second chances to become essential. Forgiveness and a willingness to try again are crucial in a successful marriage. And not only in marriage, but this is *also true* in parenting. We mean to do our best, but we mess up. Our intentions are good, but we're tired or stressed or feeling defensive and we blow it. Apologies are in order. Second chances are needed. The same is true in friendships and in basically any human relationship we have. We often need a second chance. And this is especially true in our relationship to God. How could it not be? God is injured each time we injure another. And God is injured in our neglect of our spiritual life, our abandonment of God and a life of service, our embrace of worldly success and quick fixes. God may be all mighty, but God is not invulnerable. We can hurt God. In fact, when God was incarnate, we not only hurt him, we killed him. That's how we exercised our God-given gift of free will. The sad truth is that as a species we are at times destructive and self-serving and malicious. We *need* forgiveness, *we need* a second chance. And we may need a second chance, again and again. We learn from this parable of the fig tree, that God is willing, eager, and ready to give second chances. And to give them more than once. God does not want to judge or condemn us. God wants to forgive us, love us, take delight in us, and be a part of our lives. God is even willing to go the second mile to increase our chances, to do some digging and to lay some manure down in the crucial places to enhance our growth. God isn't afraid of hard work, and some of us require an awful lot of hard work. And it may take some time, too; some process, some repeated effort, as we see in this story of the fig tree. But, as gardeners go, God is determined and forgiving and loving.

Can we, then, in *another* level of interpretation, extend this parable outwards, thinking of *ourselves* as gardeners? If God gives us one second chance after another, can we offer second chances to others, rather than concluding they are a waste of some kind in our lives and our world? Can we make the effort to give additional

time and nurture to such people or situations? Our tendency is to determine expectations *for others* in regards to how fruitful *we* think they should be. Can we, instead, recognize that we are neither judge nor jury, and others aren't actually placed in this world to live up to our expectations, hard though that can be for us to believe? It's a blessing for us to receive second chances; it's also a blessing for us to extend them.

This morning we will receive Holy Communion, a meal that has forgiveness and second chances all over it. I often think of the altar table as the Table of Second Chances. We sin, we mess up. We repent, we long for change. God offers forgiveness, renewal and second chances. Not just for us, but for all, including those we don't think deserve them. *But that's not our call.* God meets others and us, just where we are. And brings out the best in others and us, when we are open to God's Spirit. As God gives us second chances and the benefit of the doubt, may we do likewise for others. Amen.