

March 20, 2022

**“Don’t Stop Believing”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Psalm 63:1-8

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.*

Luke 13:6-9

Then he told this parable: “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 gardener, ‘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.’”

Sermon “Don’t Stop Believing”

I’ve shared before that my life is a testament that our God is a God of second chances, and third, and fourth ad infinitum. As humans our brains can’t really comprehend what infinite grace means, close as I can get is to say that we just don’t run out of grace with God. God never stops believing in us even when we stop believing in ourselves and even when others stop believing us as well.

I think this is what Jesus is trying to get at with the story of the fig tree. To me, the gardener in this story represents God telling us to allow time and give nurture to ourselves when we let ourselves down but also give time and nurture to those in our life that just haven't found their best selves yet. Those who have yet to bear good fruit.

I'm guessing every one of us has one or multiple people in our life like that, whether it is from addiction or other issues. Or perhaps it is someone that is stuck in fear, self-centeredness or anger and just isn't very pleasant to be around.

As Christians I think God calls us to be people of second chances, and third and fourth and so on. But to continue to tell people we love them, to pray for them, to continue to believe in them doesn't mean we shouldn't have good boundaries with them while they are learning to grow good fruit in themselves.

Like still inviting that family member who struggles with addiction to holiday dinners but making sure that your valuables, your medicine and liquor cabinets are all locked up. Every one of those things I learned from experience.

Giving second chances doesn't mean that we become a doormat or ATM for those who struggle. It's not easy but you can learn to say I love you and No in the same breath. Giving second chances doesn't mean that we allow those that harm us to keep harming us either.

There have been many times I have had to pray to God for the courage to do just that. Times when I just didn't have the means or energy to take care of someone else's emotions or get entrenched in their drama and self-made problems.

I have worked with people in recovery from addiction for 30 plus years now and what seems to be the hallmark characteristic of the ones that find recovery, those who start bearing good fruit is willingness.

Willingness to admit they have a problem, willingness to accept responsibility for their behaviors that have harmed relationships, willingness to stop blaming the world and others for their behavior and willingness to ask for help, not from you necessarily but from other people in recovery or mental health professionals or both.

Some people can't be reached, their pain is too great. We know that and several of us know that in ways that have brought indescribable pain but here's the thing, there was nothing that we could do.

You need to know that. That fig tree can get that second chance, all that fertilizer, all that love and prayer but that fig tree has to be able to take it in, it has to be able to bend toward the sunlight, and it has to be able to drink the living water into it's dry and parched self. That fig tree has to be able to change and grow, sometimes it is too diseased to be able to heal.

I can't say that I haven't written people off, I'd be lying. There have been times when someone has been too toxic to my spirit to be around, too full of anger and blame that it feels like I'm breathing in poison just to be in the same room with them. They seek to make you feel less than you are because they are so unhappy themselves.

The fruit they bear is defensiveness, anger and resentment and I just can't trust them to not try to catch me in their web of blame. But it doesn't mean that I stop hoping beyond hope that they will start to take a look at their part in their own misery and it doesn't mean that I ever stop praying for them.

Some never do change and you're left with that feeling, maybe I should have pruned the tree it better, or maybe I over watered it or didn't give it enough fertilizer. But you are not to blame for their choices.

I tuned into a weird show on Netflix the other day, seeking mindlessness and distraction from the horrors of Ukraine. It was a show called "Life after Death with Tyler Henry". He is a medium supposedly and gets impressions from the other side and passes them on to those who are left behind.

What struck me as true, because it's already what I believe, is that every spirit he said he communicated with was at peace and happy, no matter what bad choices they made in their life. Their messages all had the same tone. I'm sorry for all my bad choices, I'm sorry for how I treated you, I'm sorry I left you to carry on alone and with a heart full of grief, but know that I am happy, you are not to blame, and I love you.

If you have had those fig trees in your life that weren't able to drink deep of the love it was given, that were unable to live and grow, know this, that even when this life lets us down, the next one doesn't. That even when we mess up this one, God's infinite grace will always hold us.

I take comfort in this when I think of the people I've lost because of their own bad choices, or the friendships that have ended because I couldn't give more than I was giving but there is another side to this parable as well.

It's easy to think of that barren tree as someone else but I also have to ask myself, what kind of fruit do I bear, what am I giving to the people around me of sustenance? Am I bearing good fruit?

The parable holds in this manner as well. There are days when I am not allowing the living water to nourish me, even though I couldn't be more thirsty. There are days when I turn away from the gardener, saying I don't want to be nourished, I don't want your attention. I would rather just hang out in this dry and weary land and cut myself off from the sunlight of the Spirit. What do we do on those days when our fruit is sour and bitter?

For me confessing that to God is the first step, sharing with my creator all my emotions, my anger at world events, my self pity, my fear of the future, my sense of inadequacy. When I tell

God as I would a friend that I'm feeling like rotten fruit something shifts, in the telling I start to allow God back in, I start to take small sips again of the living water. I remember that the dreariness I feel never lasts and that as long as I let the gardener tend to me, I will be okay.

My prayer for all of you this week is that you bear good fruit. The fruit of love and kindness for others and love and kindness for yourself. I pray that when you feel barren of hope, something will remind you that you are going to be okay. Drink deep, allow yourself to be tended, know that you are worthy of God's attention.

May it be so, AMEN

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