

Earthy Wisdom: Jesus' Parables of Creation
Part 6: Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Niantic Community Church
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Scripture: Luke 13: 6-9

I was a frat boy in college – a member of the Sigma Chi Fraternity. At many schools, the “Sigs” are the jocks. At Whitman College where I attended, the Beta Theta Pi’s were the jocks. We were the “gentlemen scholars.” Okay, we were nerds.

We may have been nerds, but we never had a problem finding dates – at least not on Friday nights. That’s when our fraternity hosted Friday Night Formal Dinners. These dinners were prepared by a chef named Stella. Stella was in her late 60s when I arrived at Whitman, and had cooked for the fraternity for years. She was widely renowned as the best chef on campus – and not just because the dorm food was so poor at the time. Consequently, women gladly accepted invitations to be our guests at Friday Night Formal Dinners. We would all dress up like grownups and enjoy a meal that was comparable to any of the better restaurants in Walla Walla, Washington – admittedly a town few options in the mid-1980s.

This happy situation ended rather abruptly when Stella retired. Unfortunately, the committee that was charged with finding Stella’s replacement was more interested in feasting with their eyes than their mouths. Stella’s replacement was young and attractive, but her cooking ... Well, let’s just say that when the comedian Ron White talks of the time one of his wife’s biscuits rolled off the table, thudded like a hockey puck on the floor, and the dog frantically started licking its hindquarters after taking a bite of it just to get the taste out of its mouth ... I can relate!

Friday Night Formal Dinners became Friday Night Formal Embarrassments. Within just a couple of months, all the women in the dorms suddenly were too busy to join us.

At first, the leadership tried to work with the new cook. When she said the food would be better if she was given time off to do more intentional planning, it was readily granted. When nothing changed and the cook insisted that the meals would improve if she had a higher food budget, it was raised.

Finally, after many concessions and no improvement, things came to a head one particular Friday Night. Spaghetti and meatballs came out more as Noodle Goo Galore, with tomato-ketchup sauce that could dissolve teeth, and meatballs that tasted suspiciously like gym socks. For dessert, plates of brownies were passed around that tasted like flour and sugar had been mixed with nothing more than brown food coloring.

Enraged, the Vice President of the fraternity jumped to his feet, shouting “No!”

Holding one of the sugary brown globs in his hand as if he had just picked up a dead mouse, he exclaimed, “*This is not a brownie!*”

We all looked at each other wondering what he was getting at. Clearly, he was holding a brownie in his hand.

“This is not a *brownie!*” he repeated.

“Of course it’s a brownie, Kevin,” someone grunted, “Just not a *good* one.”

“No!” Kevin shouted again, pounding the table again for emphasis. “This is *not* a brownie! A brownie, by definition, is *good*. Its whole purpose is to be good. This brownie is *not* good, so it *cannot* be a brownie.”

Thus commenced a 20-minute philosophical debate about whether a brownie is a brownie, if it’s not a *good* one. (Like I said, we were nerds!)

I think this incident has stuck in my memory all these years because the philosophical argument that ensued has so many *theological* overtones. Since I’m not just a nerd, but a *theology* nerd, I see this whole debate playing out in our Parable of the Barren Fig Tree this morning.

Can a fig tree that doesn’t produce figs properly be called a *fig* tree? It may scientifically be classified as “*Ficus carica*.” It may produce fig leaves in abundance. It may even be pleasant to look at and produce fine shade for the vineyard workers. But can it properly be considered a *fig* tree if it doesn’t actually produce figs?

What does a fig tree, like a brownie, have to lack before it ceases to be a *fig* tree?

Whatever the case, the the vineyard owner doesn’t have much use for a fig tree that doesn’t produce figs. He says it’s wasting perfectly good soil. He wants to cut it down so that a proper fig tree can grow there. The only pushback he receives from the gardener is over how much time to give the fig tree to produce figs before concluding it is barren and cutting it down.

Of course, we might sympathize with the fig tree. We might argue that the vineyard owner is being self-centered. He’s only valuing the tree based on what the tree can produce for him. He doesn’t seem to recognize the tree’s intrinsic worth as one of God’s living creations.

If we’re feeling sorry for the barren fig tree, it’s probably because we’re missing the point of Jesus’s parable. Jesus isn’t telling a parable to teach his audience about the inherent worth of all living things. That’s the purpose of the parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Sparrow that falls to the ground and is not outside of God’s awareness.

Jesus is telling the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree to provoke a conversation about identity and purpose. A conversation that’s not so different from the “good” and “bad” brownie question.

Jesus’ challenge might be posed this way: As an Israelite, can you still be considered a child of Abraham if you are not living up to your end of God’s Covenant with Abraham?

According to the Covenant, God promised that Abraham’s wife, Sarah – who was barren – would have a child, and that their descendants would become a great nation, inhabiting their own land. These promises had come true. God had lived up to God’s end of the agreement.

Yet, the stated purpose of the agreement was so that the nation arising from Abraham's and Sarah's offspring would become a source of blessing for *all the peoples of the earth*. (Genesis 12:2-3)

Blessing the peoples of the world was the fruit that the tree of Israel was to bear for God and the world. Yet, in Jesus's day, the growing Zealot movement and other cultural and religious streams within Israel were preventing Israel's tree from bearing fruit. Israel had become increasingly nationalistic, and violent. People were dreaming of a day when a Messiah would arise to make war against the Romans. They saw themselves as working toward a day when defeat of Israel's enemies would lead to Israel being lifted high above all nations, such that the nations would come and bless Israel, not be blessed by Israel.

Jesus tells this parable of a barren fig tree as a warning. If there has been no fruit after all these years – no inner transformation by a God who seeks to bless all people because all God's children are loved beyond their wildest imagination – then there would be trouble ahead. In the parable, the vineyard owner threatens to cut down the tree.

John the Baptist makes a similar point when he preaches, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham!" (Matthew 3:8-9)

In light of the fact that, 40 years after Jesus's death, Jerusalem would be destroyed and the Jewish people driven off their land, some people conclude that God did, in fact, cut Israel down like a barren fig tree.

Yet, it was not God who cut down Israel, but the Romans. Jesus's parable is a warning not about what God would do to Israel if it wasn't actively seeking to live out its purpose of blessing the world, but what the world would do. If you keep assuming that you are better than everyone else, and brandishing weapons in front of your enemies instead of seeking ways to wage peace, relying on violence to vanquish your enemies rather than love, sooner or later your enemies will fight you. And if your enemy is the Roman government, you're going to lose.

We tend to think that loving our enemies is naïve. We think it will only lead to our enemies having their way with you. In the aftermath of 70 CE, it is clear who the naïve ones were in First Century Israel. The Zealots and their sympathizers win that prize hands down.

No, the fruit that Israel was to bear – the fruit that would bless the nations of the world – is the fruit that Jesus describes in his Sermon on the Mount, which at its core, is about loving all people, including those who make you most uncomfortable. (Luke 6:27-44)

In that sermon, Jesus concludes:

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

In other words, a fig tree that doesn't bear figs is not, in essence, a *fig* tree. Put another way, if Israel were a brownie, then Jesus probably would have agreed with my fraternity brother. A brownie that doesn't bless you by delighting your taste buds is not really a brownie!

One might wonder if the Parable of the Fig Tree continues to speak to our day.

We might bring this parable forward to our day by asking, can a Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim, who does not act like a Jew, Christian, or Muslim, still be considered a Jew, Christian, or Muslim?

My Muslim friends readily point out that terrorists who call themselves Muslims are not true Muslims. In the Qur'an, Allah clearly and explicitly forbids the killing of innocent people. In fact, Allah considers killing just one innocent person to be morally as grave a sin as killing all of humankind. (Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:32) Allah also states clearly that "there is no compulsion in religion," meaning that no one may be forced or coerced into accepting Islam or any other faith against their will. So, no matter how energetically a terrorist may invoke the name of Allah, terrorists cannot be true Muslims according to my Muslim friends. They hurt, rather than help, the cause of Allah in the world.

Similarly, many of my Jewish friends are appalled by modern Israel's treatment of Palestinians. Ironically, these friends are often accused by Jewish hardliners as being antisemitic when they speak out against injustices brought about by Israel. Yet my Jewish, justice-seeking friends insist that they are not criticizing Judaism, but particular actions that cannot properly be called Jewish. Those who oppress a vulnerable people may be *Jew-ish*, in that they are wrapped in the outer façade of Judaism, but they are not actually *Jewish*.

Closer to home, we Christians tend to forget that 97% of Nazi Germany considered themselves Christian. We don't tend to associate the Holocaust with Christianity or Christians, because killing Jews – not to mention all the other innocent people killed by the Nazis – bears absolutely no resemblance to anything Jesus taught, commanded, or embodied. Can a Christian who engages in genocide continue to be called a Christian? If so, what are the ramifications for other Christians, let alone the people they hurt?

So, perhaps my fraternity brother's rant about the only true brownies being good brownies applies in some way to us as people of faith. The only reason any of the world's perennial faiths exist is for the purpose of creating a better world than would exist without these faiths. If we, as people of faith, fail to produce the fruits of our faith, we are like sugar and flour and brown food coloring masquerading as brownies, but not true brownies.

If you are with me thus far, here's where you may want to get off the bus. Because the ride is about to get a little rocky as we conclude our journey.

Last week we observed that there are at least three credible threats to the future of human civilization on earth: (1) nuclear holocaust; (2) uncontrollable climate change, particularly when combined with the inevitable social, political, and economic upheaval that is already accompanying it; and (3) the unintended effects of scientific advancement, perhaps most especially manifested today by developments in machine learning, or so-called Artificial

Intelligence, which 350 of the leading AI developers and CEOs recently warned to be as great a threat as global pandemics and nuclear war.

Together, these three threats constitute the greatest existential threats to human civilization humans have ever faced. Given the magnitude of these threats, what does it say about any faith that is not actively engaged in overcoming them?

If we go over the proverbial cliff sometime in the coming years, when it was in our power to change course – as it still is in our day – will future generations consider us to be real Christians if we were not actively seeking to change our course? Or, will they look back and conclude we were simply being Christian-ish – passively accepting these threats to their future detriment?

In the early 1800s, Presbyterian minister Charles Finney led a series of protracted revivals in New York, Manhattan, and Boston. It is said that, if you came to Jesus at one of Finney's revivals, his followers prayed with you, then they led you to a room in the back. There, they would provide you with information about the Abolitionist Movement and the Women's Suffrage Movement. They did so because Finney and his followers believed that any person touched by the Holy Spirit would bear the fruit of the spirit. In their day, they considered ending slavery and uplifting women to be the Spirit's most important fruits. So, they not only gave you information, but placed a volunteer card in your hand, asking you to join one of these two great movements of Spirit.

In light of the three existential threats in our day, perhaps we should take a page from Charles Finney's book. Maybe we should be giving not just Pledge Cards to new members, and current ones. Maybe we should be distributing volunteer cards, inviting each and every one of us to participate in some way in addressing one of the three greatest existential threats we face in the 21st Century. Participating specifically through:

- (a) Peacemaking
- (b) Environmental Sustainability
- (c) Technological Humanism (That is, ensuring that technology serves humanity, not the other way around.)¹

Happily for me, whether or not Niantic Community Church actually does seek to bear fruit in one or more of these three areas is not my problem. This is the point of the sermon where I get to pick up a brownie and say, "I'm just the Interim Minister. What fruit you choose to bear with the time and resources God has given you is up to you, not me."

¹ By the way, I'm no neo-Luddite in making this point. In fact, it was ChatGPT4 that came up with the term "Technological Humanism" to describe the specific set of actions I had in mind!