

The value of a barren tree

By [Joanna Harader](#)

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In [Luke 13](#), Jesus tells a parable about a barren fig tree. The tree is planted in a vineyard, which sounds weird, but fig trees were often used as trellises in vineyards. The owner is unhappy because the tree is not bearing fruit. “Cut it down,” he says. But the vintner says, “I’ll dig around it, fertilize it. Let’s give it one more year.”

And the vast majority of the commentaries and reflections I’ve read about this story say something to the effect of, “See, God is willing to give us sinners one more chance. God is merciful . . . and yet God’s mercy is not unlimited.”

But I just can’t get on board with this reading, because it involves two major assumptions that I’m not willing to make.

First, this interpretation assumes that the vineyard owner represents God. Why would we assume this? Jesus doesn’t say it. Jesus doesn’t even imply it. Within the context of Jesus’ teaching, God is *abba*, the loving father. The rich are, at best, blinded by their wealth; at worst, they are heartless oppressors. So why in the world would we just assume that Jesus wants us to equate God with the wealthy owner of a vineyard?

Second, this “God is merciful, but . . .” interpretation assumes that the vineyard owner says “yes” to the vintner’s request. One commentator I read, as he was retelling the story, wrote about how the owner said, “O.K., but just one more year.”

Funny, I thought. That last part isn’t in my Bible. The vintner makes the request and next thing we know the parable is done and Jesus is upsetting some religious leaders (again) by healing on the sabbath.

So I can’t go with the “God is merciful, but . . .” theory.

I don’t think the owner is God. I don’t think the vintner is Jesus. I’m not convinced that Israel is (or we are) the fig tree.

I really don't like to allegorize the parables at all. It's dangerous territory. But if we must allegorize, maybe we should think about the ways in which *some* of us are like the fig tree.

The owner seems to think that a fig tree is worthless if it's not producing figs. But that simply isn't true. The root system of the fig tree is vital for slowing down soil erosion. The branches of fig trees were often used as trellises for grape vines. There are lots of ways a fig tree can be useful. (You really should check out [this beautiful piece](#) about the importance of trees, fig and otherwise.)

So perhaps the fig tree is like those of us who are unproductive, those of us who are not worth much in the eyes of the world, those of us who do not act like others think we are supposed to act. Maybe the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, the children, the misfits . . . maybe they are the fig tree.

Unappreciated. Vulnerable. Necessary.

And maybe those of us more appreciated, more accepted . . . maybe we are called to tend and fertilize the trees in hopes that fruit will emerge from the once-barren branches.

Or maybe we are called to convince the powerful, bottom-line-oriented people of the world to put away their axes. Because even barren fig trees are valuable resources—especially in a vineyard.

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