

Don't miss the judgment (Luke 13:1-9)

Jesus' parables ought to alarm us, draw us short.

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When we are too close to the parables of Jesus, they tend to lose their edge. When we know the end of the story in our bones, parables no longer surprise us. When our interpretations boil parables down to bromides, Jesus no longer confronts us with hard truths.

In short, when we find ourselves unsurprised by the parables, when we find ourselves confident of what a parable means, we can be sure we have missed Jesus' provocative teaching.

I like the first part of the parable Jesus tells in this week's Gospel text. A gardener intervenes on behalf of a seemingly unproductive fig tree, asking for one more year of nurture. But the deal the gardener makes includes a dire prospect: if the tree does not flourish in a year, then yes, pull it from the ground, roots and all.

Many of Jesus' stories leave us with uncertainty. Does the older brother come into the party his father throws? Will the woman who anointed Jesus' feet at Simon the Pharisee's home be known as something other than a "sinner" by her neighbors? What happens when the Samaritan returns to the innkeeper to pay the bill for a stranger's care? Does he even return?

Likewise, we do not know if manure and a gardener's touch ends up making any difference whatsoever. Does the gardener just delay the inevitable? Does the gardener hold off for one year the fig tree's destiny of serving as compost for

another, more productive tree?

Here the parable is alarming. I want to draw alongside the hopeful gardener, but now I also have to wonder whether his hope extends beyond a single year. How patient is this gardener, really?

Jesus' parables ought to alarm us, draw us short. This one is not just about Jesus' loving care for us. It is also a sharp reminder of the seriousness and finality of God's judgment. Do not look to the falling of towers or the violence of empire to tell you the shape of this judgment. Do not conjure the meaning of God's judgment over those who suffer. But do remember that God's judgment is certain and definitive. God abounds in forbearance, but judgment comes in its wake.

That's a parable I may not love yet may need to hear. When it comes to injustice and complicity in oppression, God's patience runs short. When it comes to the harms we inflict, God's timing is brief.

In my experience, many churches have a hard time holding on to this tension of a God of both judgment and grace. In some churches, I have heard so much about God's judgment, about the high stakes of belief and faithfulness, that God's grace proved distant or secondary. In others, I have heard about a God whose grace knows no end but very little about a God who could be troubled to judge a world torn asunder. Such a friendly God seemed to comfort the comfortable without being bothered by those crying out for justice.

Perhaps this troubling parable might draw us deeper into this difficult but productive tension. The same God who waits one more year will one day judge. The same God who judges injustice and oppression is stretching God's arms eternally to those who flee from righteousness.