

**The New Deal for the Old Church**  
**A sermon preached at Eglinton St. George's United Church**  
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**Text: Luke 13:6-9**

The owner of the vineyard was ready to cut down the fig tree. It was a waste of space. The fruit tree wasn't bearing fruit, which was its purpose after all. Why keep it? A fruitless tree in the Bible is code for God's people. Bearing fruit is a condition of our covenant with God. The owner, according to our parable has had enough. "Cut it down" he tells the gardener.

We have this lovely tree on our front lawn that produces beautiful orange berries in the fall. But our neighbours have been doing extensive landscaping for the last couple of years, and the tree is showing serious signs of distress. There is only half the number of berries this fall as usual. Our gardener suggests doing radical root surgery – to the tune of \$800.00! When I heard the cost the words that formed in my consciousness were the owner's words: "Cut it down".

Whether this is the voice of God or an inner voice of withering judgment is an open question. But we are all familiar with it, are we not? We make a mistake – screw up in some kind of way – and a voice of condemnation sounds in our head, "Cut it down". You are a waste of space, we tell ourselves. We tend to listen to this voice don't we? Perhaps we first heard it from a parent, who themselves heard it from their parents. It's passed down the generations, and eventually we don't need anybody else telling us. It becomes our inside voice. It's the cause of a lot of misery in our lives and in society, because we end up passing it along to the next generation. We somehow got the idea that anything less than perfect is unacceptable, and when we don't attain it, we hear this voice: "Cut it down".

We hear this voice as a church, coming at us from society, do we not? I received an email the other day from a woman who mistakenly got on our email list. She told me in no uncertain terms that a) she wanted to unsubscribe and b) the church was evil. She was a practicing Wiccan, a nature-based spirituality. The church had burned her sisters at the stake, she told me. She signed off with two words, the first word began with an "F" and the second word ended with two more "f's". Not only has the church not born fruit. In her mind, it had been an agent of death. "Cut it down", she was saying.

I need to tell you that one or two of our church neighbours share the same sentiment. We do quite a few weddings at Canadian Memorial. They aren't happy with the Saturday wedding traffic robbing them of their street parking. They don't get "church" and could do quite well without it. One gentleman threatened to take us to court. We live in an age when to live across from a church is an annoyance. "Cut it down".

Truth be told, secular culture just doesn't get "church". The modernist period was characterized by a rallying cry that boiled down to "cut it down". Who needs superstition? Who needs priests telling us to believe what science is revealing to be a chimera? Who needs a Bible written from a premodern consciousness, that sometimes advocates violence, that is filled with strange codes of behavior, and that often portrays God as a Judge and Executioner? Even today, muscular atheists, such as scientist Richard Dawkins and journalist, Christopher Hitchens, reflect an early enlightenment mind-set by claiming that rationalism has simply elbowed out the need for religion of any kind. They are very vocal and active in their agenda to "cut it down".

Well, these voices can get to you if you happen to be the fig tree. And honestly, who among us hasn't sometimes felt as though it's time to cut simply cut it down. I've traveled around a bit since the publication of my books, speaking at churches around the country – and the situation isn't pretty. A colleague and friend of mine, The Rev. David Ewart, produced a nifty three-minute YouTube video, showing graphically all the stats and if the current trends continue, the United Church will reach the point of no return by 2030 at the latest. The tree is stressed, the leaves are dropping, and the fruit is certainly sparse. Maybe, the season of the church has come to an end. Maybe it is time to cut it down.

But then another voice, rather forceful, in fact, surfaces. "Leave it alone for one more year. I'll dig around it, put some manure on it. Then, let's see what happens. If it bears fruit, great. If it doesn't, then fine, you can cut it down" (Luke 13:9). It's a realistic voice, wouldn't you say? There are still conditions. The tree must bear fruit – after all it's a fruit tree. But it's a voice of hope – a second chance is being offered. This surprising and unexpected voice is an advocate, not an adversary. This voice is saying that if we spend some time getting right down to the roots of the problem. If we give it some nourishment, if we create the proper conditions, then maybe the tree can still flourish. Maybe there's nothing wrong with the fig tree. Maybe, just maybe, it just needs the right kind of support.

Notice the authority in this voice. The gardener actually confronts the owner. "Leave it alone!" He's not asking. He's advocating: "I know a thing or two about helping things to grow and flourish." Notice as well, the gardener does more than hope. She's willing to back up the hope by getting her hands dirty.

### **The State of the Church**

As a result of writing a couple of books, I've spend a lot of time with United Church gardeners across Canada. These are leaders of the church, both clergy and lay people who aren't prepared to concede that the fig tree called "church" is finished quite yet. But here's a paradox when it comes to church. They find that their worst enemy is not the voice of the public, and it's not modernist atheists. Often it's their own church community. On the one hand, these good people of the congregation *sound* like the gardener: "*Don't* cut down the tree". In fact, they want their leaders to save the tree. But it can't be the voice of gardener, because, on the other hand, they are saying: "Just don't

go digging around the roots. Don't add any manure. Don't introduce any changes." Just leave the church alone. Let's keep doing what we've always done, and hope that the tree magically starts to bear fruit."

But go back to the parable for a minute. That's not the deal. The deal is: let's try some root surgery on this tree, and if it doesn't bear fruit, then it gets cut down. The fig tree *is* withering. It's one or the other – remove it or help it produce fruit. Notice, that the owner is not even prepared to preside over a slow death. He's not saying: "Poor thing. We're going to have to just let it sit there, for years and years, until the last drop of life has gone out of this pathetic excuse for tree." And the gardener isn't exactly sentimental either. She's prepared to go to work and support the life that is remaining to see if it can rejuvenate the whole tree. But she's not prepared to preside over a protracted death.

You can perhaps see the analogy with our beloved United Church of Canada. We're called to bear fruit. That's our reason for existence as God's people. And we're in a season of repair. The voice of Christ, our advocate gardener, is on our side. But he's recommending tree surgery. But you need a diagnosis of the problem before you start digging around. Here's my diagnosis:

We have a sap problem. The energy is just not flowing. It's getting stuck somewhere. My own theology is evolutionary in nature. God is *in* the evolutionary process of growth, and evolutionary growth is in God. Ever notice how many parables, just like this morning's story, are about growth? From the womb of God emerged an evolutionary universe. But we're stuck. And we're stuck at a particular worldview in the United Church called Postmodernism – featuring the "Sensitive Self". This worldview gave us many good things – pluralism, egalitarianism, and a consensus-seeking bias, social justice and the group hug! All good things – but its shadow side is killing us. For years, we've defined ourselves by what we're *against*. We've become a cause-based church.

Causes have provided us with a purpose and the energy that comes with a purpose for being. And don't get me wrong; I'm a firm believer in getting behind noble causes. We can be proud of our stands for justice, women's rights, the ordination of gays and lesbians. For the upcoming international conference on global warming in Copenhagen I plan to fast and pray, along with Bill Phipps and other United Churches, for the political leaders to get on board with doing something about the ecological crisis.

But cause-based religion will eventually run out of juice. It's possible for an institution to become addicted to causes, because we confuse them with God. The transformation of our social, political, and economic systems is one dimension or expression of life in Christ. But it's only one, and we got stuck there. And to be honest, there are many organizations that do social justice, peace, and all kinds of causes as well or better than we do.

So, new people don't come to church in the first place to get involved in another cause. In my experience, they arrive on our doorsteps because their souls are parched.

They've come through modernity and post-modernity, and it's left them in a spiritual wilderness. Modernity taught them that there is no God. Postmodernity showed them that there is no deeper truth – just “my truth” and “your truth”, and all truths are equal.

And when they arrive from out of the wilderness, are we providing them with a cool glass of water and good news that we have something to help them get back in touch with their soul? Are we witnessing to the living God in our own lives and in the lives of our community or are we telling them about our latest cause? Do they sense that we are animated by Spirit and that Christ is not just somebody who lived 2000 years ago in Palestine, but rather is alive and well today?

When we lose our conviction as a church, the tree will soon die. By conviction I mean a deep and abiding confidence that God has called us and equipped us to realize the Kin(g)dom of God in our place and time. You don't have to be a biblical literalist or a narrow-minded fundamentalist to experience this kind of conviction. Originally, the word belief had less to do with intellectual assent to a bunch of doctrines, and more to do with a heart-felt conviction that Spirit is enabling you and I to shape a new future.

Our role as disciples of Christ is less about speaking out against the evil system, and more about co-creating the kind of world that makes the worst of our system obsolete. If we're going to get the sap flowing we need to shift from emphasizing what we're against, to imagining and creating – in our congregational culture as a starting place – what we are *for*. This is what Martin Luther King Jr. did – and all that he did flowed from a deep inner conviction. How do we regain conviction – or this deep confidence that God is in us and we're in God?

### **Spiritual Practice as the Sap of Life**

We return to spiritual practice as the foundation of our life in Christ. We help people, through meditation, contemplation, and devotional practices to feel God as an animating, enlivening, beckoning and intimate Presence in their lives. In Jesus words, we help them to enter the Kin(g)dom of God, the realm in which God is always, already present. It's just a matter of awakening to this presence. And then we help people to feel God, from the inside out, as the presence of a sacred evolutionary impulse to co-create the as-yet-unrealized Kin(g)dom of God. We equip our people with practices that help them to feel the sap running through them as the presence of God.

What's going to help to get the sap flowing? We need a theology that helps people to realize and feel the immense creativity that is flowing through them. We're still living on the fumes of a redemption-based theology that is not in touch with reality as we know it to be – as science has revealed it to be. Namely, the universe is evolving.

We have this immense creative power within us that is Spirit-given. In humans natural selection has become actual selection. We are the species that is able to select our future! This creative principle, (we call it the Logos or Wisdom of God), has an interior dimension to it – it has consciousness, and guess what, friends. You are it! It is you! The

evolutionary impulse has awakened, come to consciousness, in a particular occasion and process, packaged in a particular body, and it's wearing our name. It's the most real thing about us.

So, why in the church are we always referring back 2000 years ago and making the claim that Jesus was the only human who incarnated this impulse? Jesus would laugh at this claim. It was flowing through him, and he tried to help his disciples realize that it was flowing through them as well. It *was* them. This energy can be frightening. The first disciples had trouble believing it because they didn't want the responsibility of knowing that the power to co-create the future was theirs to manifest. "Anybody who puts their hand to the plough and looks back", Jesus said, "is not fit for the Kin(g)dom of God." Jesus doesn't want us looking back because the sacred evolutionary impulse is future-oriented. This is why we forgiveness is such a central spiritual practice. We forgive not to feel good about ourselves, or even for the sake of whoever has hurt us; we forgive so that we can be released from the past in order to create the future.

"Behold", says the prophet Isaiah on God's behalf, "I am doing a new thing. It is springing forth now. Do you not perceive it?"

Theologically and ecclesiologically we still act as though all the real action took place in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, and we're just waiting for what God did back then in Jesus to play itself out. Well, it's taking place right here, right now, at ESG. There is so much sap in this congregation that you could change the world. It really is a matter of will, and a matter of deciding in what way you want to change the world.

But why not start with yourselves? A problem, said Einstein, can never be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. Yes, the world is in trouble. Yes, there is injustice. Yes, there is war and violence. Yes, the planet is in serious trouble. But we need to bring to these problems a transformed self, a soul-full self, a Christ-animated self. We need, each of us in our own unique way, to put on the heart and mind of Christ. We need to know what Christ consciousness feels like from the inside before we continue our crusade to change the world.

Think of the voice of the gardener in the parable as the voice of the Christ – speaking to us at those moments when we've given up hope – in ourselves and in our congregations. It's Christ's voice alright, speaking to us from the *future* that needs us in order to emerge; speaking to us from the *past*, our roots reaching deep into the soil of tradition; speaking to us *now*, as the sap of the evolutionary impulse to grow, to bear fruit, to be God's people in the world and for the world. By God's grace, and a Cosmic Gardener who is our gardener and advocate, our fruit bearing has just begun.