

WHERE'S THE FRUIT?
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September 6, 2009
South Cong. Church, Springfield

Psalm 139:7-18

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.'"*

I had a phone call recently from my son in Iraq. He's in the Air Force and he counsels people with combat stress. Hearing from him was one of the better blessings I've known this year.

Afterward, I asked myself, "Have you considered the miracle of sitting at a telephone, punching in a few numbers, expecting your father in Springfield, Massachusetts to pick up and say 'Hello'?"

It's amazing, isn't it? Think of the millions of people in this world with telephones. Think of all the wires and connections and microwave towers and satellites and switches. The complexity of it: so many chances to go wrong. But think of the simplicity: if it's put together right, it cannot go wrong. It has to reach your family in Massachusetts.

I mean, would you ever sit down at your telephone and enter eleven digits picked at random, expecting to reach the party you wanted? You might get somebody; you might get nobody. The one person you would not get is your family in Springfield!

(Of course that's what people try to do when they play the lottery. They play a number in the hope that just those digits in just that lineup will land them the Megabucks. How long do you suppose they have to keep doing that, before they realize how dumb it is?)

It's a matter of the odds, isn't it, that are so astronomically stacked against winning the prize.

But if you think those odds are out of sight, now consider the odds against **You** ever having been born! Talk about odds! Given what you know about reproduction and your family tree and the gene pool, what are the mathematical odds that this person they call YOU -- this person called Eric Bascom, or this person who Peter Heinrichs, or this person who is instantly recognizable as Ellie Lammers or Larry Picard -- with this appearance, this personality, these characteristics, these abilities, this DNA, would ever have seen the light of day?

Oh, someone would get born, but that's not the question. The question is YOU. How did YOU happen?

You can't answer by saying, "Oh, I happened by accident," (even though quite a few people are born by accident.) But if YOU happened by accident how is it that YOU are the accident that happened?

The Bible is so much more sensible when it says that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and it was God who formed our inward parts, God who knit us together in our mother's womb, and God who beheld our unformed substance before we ever existed! On our left shoulders there's a logo we can't see, unless we look at it under a certain kind of Light. It says, "Made in the Image of God." Behind us is a process with a purpose, a Creator who makes us so that we might **be** something, and **do** something, and live up to that image.

Is that a long way around to get to this scripture lesson, and to this barren fig tree? No, because like a human being, the fig tree didn't arrive in the vineyard by accident, either. It's not a weed; it was planted. It was intended! It's got a reason for being. It's supposed to bear fruit.

And here's the man who owns the place saying, "Hey, where's the fruit?"

If we're planted with a purpose, where's the fruit? Where's our fruit, the fruit we alone can bear? Because an awful lot of us spend our time pulling nutrients out of the soil and putting out leaves and blossoms, but **is** that all

we're here for! Where's the fruit?

Someone says, "Now, let's not get too tough on people; life is hard." And I agree it's hard. In fact, Annie Dillard, in her book on *The Writing Life*, says that an aspiring photographer annually brought a stack of his best photos to an old, honored photographer (an Ansel Adams type), for his advice. Every year the old man studied the prints and separated the good from the bad. And every year, the old man noticed, he had to put a certain landscape print into the bad pile, but year after year it kept coming back in the good pile.

Finally he said to the aspiring photographer, "You keep bringing back this same picture that every year I throw out. Tell me why you like it so much."

The young man said, "Because I had to climb a mountain to get it."

But do you see his problem? Having to climb a mountain to take a picture still didn't make it a good picture. So what if we had to work really hard to get those nutrients out of the ground, to put out those leaves and blossoms? The question still is, "Is the fruit any good? And is there enough of it?"

Annie Dillard says a New York cabdriver sang his songs to her, just driving around. He turned the meter off, and sang to her. Some songs she sang with him. She said he sang one song, one long song, twice, and it was his only bad song.

She said to him, "Why do you sing that one twice? Let's hear another."

He said, "Oh, you don't know how long it took me to put that one together."

Well, yeah, it took a lot to put it together! It took a lot to go out there and get the education, and land the job, and make the living for the family... but if that's all, maybe it's still a lousy song... or a not-so-hot life! Just because it's hard to do, doesn't automatically make it all that good!

A man says to me, "When I was younger I wanted to be a teacher of children. Then I moved into a more lucrative field, and I made a lot of money. I have a yacht. We spend every winter in Tortola. But I don't know....there's still something missing."

And I thought, "How sad."

But I felt sadder still when he said, "But now there's no turning back."

For it's a sad reflection on real life that for so many of us, the dreams of yesterday are not fulfilled.

Most of us die with our best music still in us. A lifetime flits past, quicker than scat. Henry David Thoreau talked about the young man collecting materials - the lumber, nails, tools, and skills - and he laid out the plans for a palace. At mid-life he whittled it back to a somewhat large house. And by old age he had settled for a somewhat rickety woodshed. I have compassion for the failures of this world, because I know what it is to dream palaces and achieve woodsheds - just like you. We've all failed to achieve the majesty of God's image in us.

And the husbandman cometh, saying, "Where's the fruit?"

We don't like the idea that God holds us accountable for bearing fruit. But he planted us; we're his fig trees, and it's his vineyard. We are his idea; we are born by intention and not by chance. As owner of the vineyard, he comes around looking for the fruit, and he says, "This tree hasn't borne fruit in three years! Cut it down!" How do you like that concept?

Oh, I guess we think we're liberals, and we don't believe in a God of judgment, a God who says, "No fruit—cut it down!" We like the idea that if the tree keeps drawing up nutrients and putting out pretty leaves, then God's got to love it. But Jesus never said anything that silly. No, according to Jesus God says, "Cut it down!"

I know a woman was so satisfied with herself, and her stock certificates, and the annuity her husband left her, that she thought it was not only *God's* duty but everyone's duty, to keep her in comfort and keep trouble away from her door. But when she said her prayers one night, instructing God as to what he must do to amuse her tomorrow, she failed to hear his real response: "It's time to cut the old tree down!" Her maid found her, stone cold, in the morning.

I know a man who consistently mistreated his family. He abused his wife. He isolated himself from his sons and his daughter. He never speaks to his children and grandchildren. He is so brilliant he grasps quantum theory, and is a critic of Einstein. But he uses this brilliance, not to build others up but to put them down. People look at him and say, "Poor Ned! But it's probably too late to change." And you can almost hear them under their breath, say the unthinkable: "Cut it down!"

Is it too late to change? Whether you're young or old, when you're lost, it really doesn't do much good to keep driving ahead, getting more and more lost. The best course is to pull off to the side, and get out the road map (Bible), and try to figure out where you made the wrong turn. Then turn around, and it may be you'll locate a crossroad. You'll know it's the right one because there's a man there with a head scarred by thorns and with a beckoning hand, a hand with holes in it directing traffic. He's there as your Guide.

Jesus said to God, "Please, Sir, I know this tree has not borne proper fruit for an entire generation. But please, I pray you, let it be alone with me for awhile, and let me dig around it and improve its soil. Let me water it, and fertilize it, and give it the attention of my own tough, tender love. And give it a year. And if it bears fruit then, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down."

That's what Jesus does for us. He gives us that additional chance. Can you feel the mercy in that intervention? He's the only one who offers it! There are no other options. We could keep going on our own, for how long we don't know, but it hasn't worked so far. We could keep on grasping at the nutrients, down there out of sight, but we'll always feel hungry. We can think about how pretty we look, but that fades. Isn't it time we gave Jesus of Nazareth the chance that he asks? Isn't it timethat we ...surrendered?

In silence, let us pray.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Amen.