

Lent 3 C Sermon  
Luke 13:6-9  
March 20, 2022

*Bring Out the Figgy Pudding!*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*<sup>6</sup>Then [Jesus] told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>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?’ <sup>8</sup>He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”*

~o~

This morning, I’ll begin with a rather unusual admission. I love Figgy Pudding. I have spent literally hours pouring over recipes, collecting ingredients and pudding molds, and even longer still trying out these various methods in hopes of coming ever-closer to the perfect pudding.

Figgy Pudding has a long and storied history. It originated in medieval England, but was actually banned in 1647 by Oliver Cromwell for being too “Catholic.” The 13-ingredient dessert (12 ingredients representing the disciples and 1 representing Jesus) was lumped in with Christmas Carols and other traditions viewed as corruptions to the holiday during the puritanical Commonwealth period! Happily, Figgy Pudding was reinstated about 50 years later by King George I.

My obsession with Figgy Pudding—also called Plum Pudding or simply, Christmas Pudding—began in 2003 when I left the university where I was studying in France to join a couple of my classmates for the Christmas holiday at their home in Ireland. After the Christmas-Day Feast, my friend’s mother brought out a sticky brown lump smothered in yellow custard and served it for dessert—Figgy Pudding. It was divine and I’ve made it almost every Christmas since. The interesting thing about Figgy Pudding, though, is that for all the ingredients it does contain—raisins, currants, orange zest, lemon zest, nutmeg, cinnamon, mixed spice, flour, sugar, eggs, brown bread crumbs, suet, and brandy—for all the ingredients it does contain, Figgy Pudding does not contain even a trace of fig.

This dessert would have been perfect then for the vineyard owner in the parable Jesus told his friends. This man had planted a fig tree three years ago and still the tree had not produced a single fruit. Eager to make room for something useful, the owner instructed his gardener to chop down the barren tree, but the gardener persuaded the vineyard owner to give the tree one last chance. He would cultivate the soil and fertilize it and if it still yielded nothing, well, then he would chop it down. I can almost hear the vineyard owner shouting, “Bring out the Figgy Pudding and bring it right here!”

There is something unsettling about this parable for me. As you know, parables are rarely about the people or things in them, but they point beyond themselves to real-life people or situations. Parables are teaching stories, typically employed to get through to even the most obtuse of Jesus’ hearers. A classic interpretation of this parable suggests that God is the vineyard owner ready to chop down the tree. Jesus is the gardener begging just a little more time and we are the tree. I don’t like the idea of such an impatient God or of a Jesus that has to beg God to reconsider a harsh judgment. And I certainly don’t like the idea of being the tree that’s been

given one year to produce fruit worthy of the space I take up in the vineyard or it's the axe. That's a lot of pressure! But, I don't really believe that's what this parable is actually about.

Truth be told, I think that we actually represent two of the characters in the story. On the one hand, I think we are the vineyard owner—impatient, economical, swift to bring down the axe if fruit is not borne according to our own timetables. On the other hand, I think we are also the tree—expending every last bit of our energy to dig deeper roots, to stretch wider branches, to grow larger, shadier leaves, but there is just no energy left to produce figs. Have you ever felt like that tree? I know I have. We give all that we have to give and still, we hear the voice of the vineyard owner, our own voice or the voices we perceive coming from others saying, “I want to see fruit and if you can't produce it, no matter how hard you try, you'll be cut down.”

Here entereth the gardener. Finally, a voice of reason and assurance. “Give me one more year,” he begs. “I'll cultivate the soil and fertilize the tree. It will yield its fruit and if it doesn't, then you can cut it down.” Friends, that voice, the patient gardener, that voice is divine. The truth is, we are our own worst enemy. We are both the tree and the one bearing the axe.

Life is tough! How can we make Figgy Pudding without figs and how can we bear fruit when we have so little left to give? And yet for all the fatigue that we feel, the exhaustion that threatens to claim every bone and muscle of our bodies, we pile on expectations, deadlines, endless tasks, and seemingly dire consequences. But in the back of our mind a voice is desperately trying to break in, “Be patient. Give the tree another year. I'll cultivate the soil and fertilize it. It will bear fruit.” And when that year passes and the fruit is still not apparent, the same voice will ask for more patience and more time because, the truth is, we are both the tree and the axe barer. It's the divine voice of the

Gardener asking us to be as patient and gentle and loving and nurturing with ourselves as that gardener is with us.

That's not to say that we should not push ourselves or have high expectations for ourselves or for others. It is to say, however, that when we fall short of our goals, when we don't bear the fruit we're trying for, that is not the same thing as failing. We have to remember how far we've come. Remember the deep roots we've dug, the high branches we've stretched, the leafy canopy that shades and shelters others. Remember all that we have accomplished. If we're going to challenge ourselves to produce a particular kind of fruit, and we want to remain happy, then we can't have the vineyard owner's outlook. We can't evaluate things in terms of success or failure.

We can do our best to become our best and celebrate what we achieve along the way. Remember the divine voice of the gardener, always reminding us to take more time, to cultivate the soil and fertilize the roots. Be patient, the fruit that *you* are meant to produce will come, but it may not be the figs you set out to bear.

And so, as we continue on the journey of lent, the journey of life, put down the axe, see the tree looking back at you in the mirror, the one with deep roots, outstretched branches, and shading leaves. Be patient with yourself and with others as the gardener is patient with the tree. And keep growing. This could be the year for figs. May it be so. Amen.