



## “The New Deal for the Old Church”

The owner of the vineyard was ready to cut down the fruitless 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. The image is used by some biblical writers to make the point that bearing fruit is a condition of the covenant with God. There are conditions. The owner, according to this perspective has had enough. “Cut it down” he tells the gardener.

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 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 naturally pass it on. 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”.

This voice comes at us as a church from our culture, does it 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 “P'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 neighbours share the same sentiment. 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. They'd be quite happy if we were “cut down”.

Truth be told, we're living in an age that 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 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 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. 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 a little 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**

I spent two days earlier this week with 35 gardeners from Saskatchewan and Alberta. They were 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, they *sound* like the gardener: “Don't cut down the tree”. In fact, they were explicitly called to these congregations to save the tree. But it's not 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 radical husbandry 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.

So, my role with these willing gardeners was to help them to go to their constituencies and lay out the terms of the deal - I supported them to find their strong gardener voice. I also offer a few gardening tips. Can you guess where I got these tips? I can't tell you how crucial it was to these leaders to know that a congregation exists that is prepared to get down to the roots of the problem, try out some new gardening techniques, and by God's grace find itself bearing fruit. They asked me to thank you for sending me to them to share our story. Not that it was all one-way – not by a long shot. I was also inspired and encouraged by their stories of congregations that were consenting to the gardening contract. But here's the point: in the orchard of the United Church of Canada, it's incredibly important to be able to offer examples of congregations that have consented to root surgery, to new practices and new processes which helped the sap to flow once again.

I want to thank you for being that kind of congregation. Over the last 13 years together, you've shown that you understand the deal. It wasn't always easy, but my assessment is that we're harvesting an abundant crop to share with the world. It's such a pleasure for me to be serving a congregation that gets the deal.

### **An Evolutionary Step**

And today, at our congregational meeting, we take our next step as a congregation. We vote on our new Purpose – to teach and practice an evolutionary Christian spirituality. The parable of the gardener is all about growth – not just in numbers, but also in spirit and soul, in authentic relationships, in compassion for the suffering of all creation, including human. To embrace an evolutionary Christian spirituality, by definition, is to organize around practices and processes that encourage growth. It is to recover ancient practices and discover new practices that help us to be fruit bearing year after year after year. And since God is known in and through evolutionary dynamics – in nature and in human culture – we want to align ourselves with this dynamic.

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, our fruit bearing has  
just begun.