

Marking the New Year

Luke 13:6-9

January 3, 2021 for La Verne COB and shared more broadly

Russ Matteson

Isn't that parable from Luke's Gospel a curious one? "Cut the tree down and throw it into the fire" is the command which makes sense as why would you use the resources and space on an unproductive tree? And yet the gardener in the story asks for one more year, a chance to use the days that lie ahead to make a difference and get good growth and produce fruit from the tree. There is no resolution to the parable, we aren't told if the gardener is successful. All we know is that the year ahead has been given to work at growth, and the future, as they say, is in God's hands.

This parable is one that is often used around Watchnight services, a worship service that invites followers of Jesus to take time to look into the year ahead and renew their commitment to living faithfully as a disciple. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist tradition, is usually credited as the originator of the service, although it was the Moravians who in 1733 first started religious gathering at the new year for a time of recommitment to Jesus and reexamination of the presence of God's grace in the lives of the faithful. And for African-Americans, Watchnight has connections to December 31, 1862, also known as Freedom's Eve when African Americans gathered in homes and churches to watch for the dawn of the new day when the Emancipation Proclamation would take effect and, on paper at least, liberate those held in slavery in the Confederate states from bondage.

I first encountered the watchnight tradition when I served as the youth pastor at Fourth St. United Methodist Church while in Seminary. Their youth group tradition was a lock-in on New Year's Eve. As I set out to plan devotions for the time together overnight at the church, I found the Watchnight service there from the early days of the Wesleyan tradition, and so in the midst of our games and movies and eating and revelry, we took time to quiet our spirits, think about our living in the way of Jesus, and share together in communion as we recommitted our living for the year ahead.

The new year is a time when we are invited and encouraged to take a look at so many areas of our lives and consider making "resolutions" as to what we might change about our lives in the year to come. *Via Magazine* reports that 45% of Americans do make some kind of resolution at the new year; the article didn't share how many have already been broken by January third.

I wonder how often, as we make those lists, do we as followers in the Jesus way include a look at our lives as disciples as we consider our intentions for the year ahead? So often it seems that the focus of our resolutions is on eating more healthily, getting exercise, working on our finances, quitting smoking - all of which are things that are good for us. But if we are to take seriously what it means for us to find our truest selves in Jesus, perhaps this old tradition of a Watchnight recommitment is a good idea.

Our focus today, and as I understand the tradition, is not for us to set about making a list of resolutions or changes that we are going to do to make ourselves better spiritually. As most of us know, most of the time, we don't do very well at following through on resolutions. And we have tended to beat ourselves up enough already about our religious shortcomings - that we don't pray enough, or read the Bible enough, or show charity and kindness and service enough.

This morning I invite you to take some time to consider your life as a follower of Jesus as the "fig tree" in the room with you. And you are partnering with God who is the gardener to figure out what might help the fig grow - it is a mixture of art and science - trying some of this, cutting back a bit on something else, a bit more of this - really it is the practice of paying attention to what is happening and then responding to the change or need that we experience.

As I have been looking at my own discipleship fig tree, I am aware that this season of pandemic has been a shock to my roots. I just don't seem to have my self set as firmly in the soil after these challenging months. My tree may look okay up top, but as I work with the gardener it seems that some work on what my roots are taking in to nourish the fig may be in order. "What have you been feeding this tree? Are you giving it enough water?" the gardner asks me. "It's been a tough time, I feel a bit distracted by the world and all that is going on," I respond. "Distraction, hmm. You need to pay attention to what you're feeding it, the mix doesn't quite seem right." And so I am paying attention, trying to be less distracted by things that aren't feeding my spirit, making room for things that might be more nourishing each day. Which things, the gardener didn't say, but I'm thinking maybe a little less input of television and twitter news, more time with literature and art. The gardener just encouraged me to give it a try and see what happens to the tree's health, and then adjust from there.

Following Jesus in our daily lives is all about paying attention. It is about being aware of the call of Jesus, the call of the world and where and how Jesus invites us to engage it, the movement of the God Spirit in and around and through us. A little more of this, a little less of that, being aware of our connection to Jesus in all that we do or refrain from doing.

As we close our time this morning I invite you to a time of prayer, using the words that John Wesley wrote to be used as a prayer of recommitment of our lives to God as the new year began. The words may feel a bit antiquated and foreign, but I hope you will open your spirit to the hope and desire they express for living life fully in relationship with God as we move through the year to come. It is a wonderful expression of what it means for us to be united with God, and through that, with one another. And I hope you will take some time later today or in the week ahead with the gardener. I invite you to use that time to begin the conversation about what will make your tree grow and produce fruit in the year to come - for that is what God the gardner is working for in each of our lives. Amen.

Watch Night Prayer*** (unison)

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt,

rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,

exalted for thee or brought low by thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things

to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Thou art mine and I am thine. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

***John Wesley Watch Night Prayer

John Hobbins

(<http://ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com/files/the-covenant-prayer-of-john-wesley-1.pdf>

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