

I am married to a gardener.

For those of you who are also married to gardeners, you know there is a whole world wrapped up in that sentence.

In late winter, all the sun-facing windowsills of our house are covered in seed-starts.

Then, every spring, on a fine spring day, I will step out the back door into the yard, and the smell will practically knock me off my feet. First, there is the seaweed fertilizer. Later, the bokashi fertilizer will come into play.

What, you may be asking, is bokashi?

I'm glad you asked. It's the liquid that comes about as a result of the fermentation of household scraps. I'll let you imagine what that does to beagles.

I get periodic reports on the condition of the mulch.

Every Friday night is given over to watching *Gardener's World* on the BBC, a show that the New York Times credits with getting an entire segment of the population through the pandemic. And when the produce of the garden begins to come in, because it is all organic and home-grown, there develops a fine sheen of soil on the kitchen counters.

I've learned in the summer simply to wipe down the counters before setting any food on them, lest whatever I'm making absorb some stray humus in the preparation.

And then, there is that moment, that heavenly moment, when the first tomatoes come off the vine. And it's all worth it, particularly when in August the kitchen is overrun with tomatoes and the roasting and freezing starts.

Gardening is *hard work*.

Now, the gospel tells us that Jesus's yoke is easy and his burden is light... but that's not the same as saying his yoke is nothing and his burden is nil. It's to say that Jesus does all the heavy lifting, but – and this is key – *work remains for us*.

So, we turn to our parable. A parable, you recall, is a *story*.

Jesus frequently taught by telling stories.

At times, his stories can be frustratingly obtuse, with even his own disciples struggling to understand them.

Occasionally, the disciples will ask for help understanding, and Jesus will tell them what the parable meant, but in all likelihood, those instances are the moments when the early church found the parable so confusing that they added their own interpretation into the text.

The disciples – and perhaps we ourselves – sometimes wish that Jesus would just speak plainly.

Just tell us what he wants. Just give us the shortcut to understanding.

Yet Jesus himself seems perfectly happy to let the parables stand on their own.

I'm reminded of what Billy Collins wrote about poetry:

“I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,  
or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.  
I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46712/introduction-to-poetry>

*The thing about parables is we have to do some work.* There is not a secret decoder ring.

We have to see ourselves in them.

What I see may not be what you see, and what you see may not be what I see.

But in seeking to see ourselves in the parables... well, we might actually *see* ourselves.

The parable of the fig tree appears in Mark and Matthew as well, but in their versions of the story, it's just a tree that gets cursed. There's no redemption for the fig tree. Jesus walks by one day, the figs aren't where he expected them to be, and he applies a little divine round-up to the tree. Later the disciples pass by the tree again, and it's dead as a doornail.

There's a strong implication that those practices that do not bear fruit are next to go, so *watch out*.

But here, in Luke's gospel, it's a more hopeful story, because it holds forth the possibility for *repentance*.

The Hebrew and the Greek words for repentance that we find in our bibles mean exactly the same thing. They translate, literally, as *turn around*.

There are moments when it is insanity to keep going in the same direction.

Some years back, when I was newly at First Church in Philadelphia, there was a weekend when our country experienced two mass shootings in twenty-four hours. When I stood up to preach the following Sunday, everything I had prepared seemed inadequate to the moment, so I did that thing that I so rarely do: I deviated from the sermon I had written.

Those of you who know me know that the script is for your protection, not mine. I can go on, and on, indefinitely, so to keep it to twenty minutes we have these notes.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't have anything profound to add to that moment, but I said, "I don't know what the answer is, but I do know the church cannot be silent on these tragedies. We have to find *something to do*."

We formed a Gun Violence Prevention Task Force. The Task Force quickly established that going after guns wasn't a fruitful path to follow, for a variety of reasons, but mostly because we wanted to have an inclusive approach to different viewpoints, so we began to wonder what a conversation about *gun safety* would look like.

As conversations continued throughout the pandemic, my dear friend Cindy Jarvis became the leader of the task force, and we began exploring how the church could participate, as God calls us to, in the healing of the world. In April, our congregation will host an exhibition of the *Souls Shot Portrait Project*.<sup>2</sup>

This project seeks to provide an experience of healing to the families of victims of gun violence. Fine Artists are paired with family members, who tell about their loved ones, and the collaboration yields a portrait. About their work, they say this, "We hope that this project will continue to bring some joy and peace to the families and friends of victims and, by bringing attention to the scourge of gun violence in this way, be a call to action to all who see them."

Does fine art solve the problem of the proliferation of guns in American culture, endangering our communities and our law enforcement?

Probably not, in the near-term, no.

But what I see is *the cultivation of figs*.

Luke Timothy Johnson of the Candler School of Theology writes, "...In Luke, it is a parable that clearly has the function of interpreting this section of the narrative. The fig tree is *not* summarily

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.soulshotportraitproject.org>

cut down. The *comfort* to Jesus's listeners is that the prophet is still on his way to the city, there is still time to respond. The *warning* is that if they do not, they will surely be cut off."<sup>3</sup>

There are moments when it is insanity to keep going in the same direction.

These are the moments when repentance calls us to turn around, to choose a new way of being in the world, to choose a new relationship, to choose redemption, to choose mercy, to choose the way of Jesus Christ.

During the Korean war, a young Korean student at the University of Pennsylvania was going to the mailbox when he was attacked by a gang of teenage boys, who beat him with their shoes and their fists and left him in the gutter to die. The city of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love and sisterly affection, was horrified that such a thing could happen in our city. The city cried out for vengeance, and the prosecutor secured permission to try them as adults, which could have resulted in the death penalty.

But then, a letter arrived from Korea signed by the young man's parents and relatives.

It read, "Our family has met together and we have decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal action... in order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational, and social guidance of the boys when they are released. We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins."<sup>4</sup>

That is *the cultivation of figs*.

There are moments when things can turn.

They can turn on a portrait.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1991) p214

<sup>4</sup> *Illustrations Unlimited*, James S. Hewett, ed. (Tyndale, Wheaton, 1988) pp213-214

They can turn on a letter.

But things can change.

Gardening takes work. The cultivation of figs *takes hard work*.

On the website, *The Forgiveness Project*, Arno Michaelis recounts his past as a white supremacist and his journey out of white supremacy. He writes of a time when he was so completely wrapped up in his racial identity that the revelation that he is 1/16 Indian reduced him to cutting his own wrist. He tells of beating people up for no reason other than the color of their skin or their sexual orientation. He writes, “I radiated hostility, especially towards anyone with a darker skin complexion than mine, and I had a swastika tattooed on the middle finger of my right hand. One time I was greeted by a black lady at a McDonald’s cash register with a smile as warm and unconditional as the sun. When she noticed the swastika tattoo on my finger, she said: ‘You’re a better person than that. I know that’s not who you are.’ Powerless against such compassion, I fled from her steady smile and authentic presence, never to return to that McDonald’s again.”<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to say, “It wasn’t until I became a single parent at age 24 that I began to distance myself from the movement. I’d lost a number of friends to either prison or a violent death by now and it started to occur to me that if I didn’t change my ways then street violence would take me from my daughter too. And once I began to distance myself from the constant reinforcement of violence and hatred, suddenly it began to make much less sense to me.”<sup>6</sup>

Pardeep Kaleka lost his father in a mass shooting at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

Seeking to understand how it could have happened, he reached to Arno Michaelis.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/arno-michaels/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

“Arno was able to help me understand the behavior and fears of Page [the shooter]. He spoke about the self-destructive nature of hate, and the painful consequences of identifying with the white supremacist ideology. Since Arno and I met, we’ve become as close as brothers, waging peace together to honor my father and all lives lost in the wake of violence. Through the organization we’ve created together, [Serve 2 Unite](#), children of all ethnicities, from the inner city to the suburbs, are coming together to cherish each other as human beings and to assume the identity of peacemakers in their schools and communities.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there are the figs.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/pardeep-kaleka/>

**13** At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." <sup>6</sup> 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. <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.'"