

YOU AND I—WE ARE THE FIG TREE

Do you remember the scene after the resurrection of Jesus when Mary Magdalen has found the tomb empty, gone to tell the apostles about it and then returns herself to the empty tomb to do some more looking around? She comes across a man whom she presumes is the cemetery's gardener and she asks him if he has stolen Jesus' body and where did he put it. And that she will go get it. In that moment Jesus (whom she has mistaken for the gardener) says her name: "Mary!" And immediately everything changes. She knows it is Jesus. She says: "Rabbouni!" It is a kind of hybrid Hebrew word, kind of a cross between Rabbi and Abbouna, Mentor and Papa. But initially she didn't recognize the one she loved when she was looking right at him. He appeared to be the gardener. Do you think that that is how Jesus looked?

Today's gospel finds us listening to Jesus tell a story about a figless fig tree. It usually takes three years for a fig tree to produce figs for the first time. But there are no figs on this tree. It looks like it isn't going to produce figs. So why not cut it down and replace it with one that will produce figs. But the gardener pleads for the fig tree's life. Give it a little more time. You can always cut it down later. The gardener says that he will water it and manure it and tend to it. So, what is this story about? What does the fig tree refer to? It refers to me—and you. Each of us is the fig tree. And so the one who planted the fig tree, in our case, Almighty God, comes looking for our figs. I ask myself: What kind of figs is the Father looking for from me? What kind of fruit am I to produce? And from you? Are you bearing fruit? Does the father like what he sees in you? In me? Is what I do and how I think and act actually bear fruit in the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced?

How does the Divine Gardener tend to me and you? What is the mulch he surrounds us with that will help us to bear fruit? There is an allotment of grace which our God makes available to each of us. Do I recognize it? Have I let it in? Better yet, have I opened it and accepted it and cooperated with it? How does this allotment of grace come to me? It comes each day. Daily. Like daily bread. It comes in different forms. Sometimes it is an opportunity to stand up for the truth as a man or woman of integrity. Sometimes it is a moment when the defenseless need someone to defend them. At other times it is doing the right thing precisely because it is the right thing to do even when I don't feel like doing it. Sometimes it takes the form of sacrifices we are bidden to make. At other times it is a dying to self. There are moments when we are just there without being able to really do anything except pray and love. All of that is the stuff that the gardener uses to help us become fruitful in this life, to make a difference, to leave the world better than we found it. But the fig tree must respond. Yes. We must.

What if I haven't been responsive? What if I have reverted to my old ways, my old sinful habits? To ways that I hate in myself but let myself embrace anyway? Who can save me from this? The gardener can. But he must prune away some of the dead wood and sometimes even shoots that are alive but will not bear fruit. And I must recognize when this is happening and allow it to be even though I don't like it. Sometimes I resist his ways. Sometimes I will not forgive, I will not let go of the hurt, the anger, the slight, the demeaning action, the nasty response, the dismissive look. Sometimes it is real these sins against us from others. Yes, the world is full of sinners, sinful people who do bad and wrong things. And sometimes I am one of them and so are you. Am I truly thrilled that Jesus ate with sinners, those very ones who have done me wrong? That he spends time with those who broke the rules and bent them to serve themselves? But haven't there been moments when I have done that very thing myself—for my advantage? Aren't there times when it is very clear that I am the sinner? That I am the fig tree with no

figs? What are the Lord's expectations of me in this life? What did he have in mind for me when he made me and chose to give me life?

These are important questions. We do not have much time. That is the point of Jesus two references to the Galileans whom Pilate killed and the people killed when the tower collapsed. We do not have the luxury of unlimited amounts of time. The time to change our ways is now. That's repentance. The time to begin to bear fruit is now. We have no guarantee of some future when we can change ourselves. The time is right now and the place is right here. Conversion. Change your heart where it need to be changed.

There is a short poem by a woman named Rita Simmonds called *The Fruit of Mercy*. Please listen.

The Fruit of Mercy

*I am a fruitless fig tree
three years barren
depleting the earth
of its resources,
Giving nothing,
not even shade,
in return.*

*Who will plead the cause
of a fruitless tree?*

*One who looked like a gardener
came.*

*He bent to the ground,
wrote words I couldn't read
in the soil
around my feet.
He gave food to my roots
and asked me.*

"Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir."

*"Fig tree!" he cried,
gazing up at me.*

*Figs sprouted from my limbs.
He rose and turned to go.
I could not cling,
But
I will always carry fruit
For him.*