

Blessed be God who animates our lives and teaches us to care for and tend to all of creation; that is our baptismal covenant. AMEN

Tending, pruning, nurturing, caring...

These are the verbs of gardening and also of loving kindness which are woven through the parable of the fig tree.

They are also the fruits of the Holy Spirit. They assist in the cultivation of vegetation and of character.

Whether we are the owner, the gardener or the tree, or the fertilized dirt, matters less than the theological point which I believe is: never give up on God's creation for not producing immediate fruit, translated results; always remember and have faith that tenderness and compassion and mercy are life-giving.

The pastoral care of the gardener and the possible renewal of life for the fig tree is a microcosm of God's kingdom. There is a mutuality of understanding of what is needed. There is also a creative imagination which refuses to reduce what appears to be true on the surface and instead inspires a prayerful shifting of expectations.

Many of us have experienced times when love and care brought someone or something back to life when we were about to give up. Talk about surprised by joy.

I remember saying good bye to our first dog Tara only to be scolding her for jumping on the Thanksgiving table a few months later. I have witnessed pastoral care in homes and hospitals wherein simply showing up with the love of God transformed the space and gave new life.

I have witnessed the healing touch of volunteers holding crack babies and dogs rescued from violent and abusive circumstances becoming calmed by deep abiding persistent care and tenderness.

But rarely have I been so moved as I was reading the story of Darren.

Darren was in eighth grade for the third time. Unlike any of his classmates he had a full beard. He had witnessed his mother's murder and appeared tough, masculine, and walked with a stay away from me swagger. One day in his Roots of Empathy program which comes into schools to teach caring for others in the world the opposite of bullying, a young mother came with her infant to talk with the class about caring for a baby and some of the personality differences encountered. She pointed out, demonstrated actually, that her son Evan would only tolerate the snugli carrier facing out. She bemoaned this fact as it kept her from enjoying him facing her chest and settling against her for comforting.

Just as the class was ending she invited anyone in the class who wanted to try on the carrier. Almost everyone declined hoping to get to lunch. But Darren raised his hand to come up front and try on the snugli, even with its pink frilly border. And then something astounding happened: he asked if he could put the infant in the carrier and though at first hesitant the mother allowed darren to do so. He placed the infant in, not facing out but facing in, A slight gasp was heard and then the baby just cuddled into Darren's chest and rested. Darren walked away for a few minutes rocking the baby as he strolled.

As if that were not enough, Darren then quietly asked the mother and teacher: If noone has ever loved you do you think you could be a good father?

And awe came upon everyone!

Darren, a gardener, a baby and a fig tree...It seems to me they all knew the power of love, the power of tenderness, the power of reverence.

We commit in our Baptismal covenant to respect the dignity of every human being. Respect is deeper than politeness. It certainly means to not objectify anyone as that denies its love of God. It certainly looks sometimes like kindness, sometimes like tenderness, sometimes like courage, sometimes like mercy and sometimes like reverence.

Be merciful as your father is merciful is what we are told in Luke's sermon on the plain. And we have talked about how mercy is related to the womblike nurturance a mother has for her child. But mercy is genderless.

Fig trees and babies require the kind of mercy and respect which comes from a)not giving up on them and b) loving them with reverence.

Reverence is a word often reserved for God. But reverence which is defined as deep respect is also meant to be offered to every aspect of God's creation.

It may be expressed with an expression which tells all, or a gesture which bespeaks total connection. It is wrapped in tenderness and kindness and mercy.

The parable of the fig tree seems to be a fitting one for Lent. This is certainly a season in which we prune the non essential characteristics and habits to make room for new life, resurrection life. It is the season we remember, literally re member our lives, that we might realize the fruits of the Holy Spirit more fully.

Reverence as Life Giving Care  
Sermon Sunday March 24, 2019  
The Rev. Dr. Martha Tucker

And so the process while often difficult also holds much hope. The hope which does not disappoint is the hope in things not seen, growing into the fullness of holiness.

I invite you to be as the fig tree and be pruned and tended with the life-bearing sap of God's mercy. I invite you to me as the gardener and gaze upon creation with renewed reverence, a gaze embodies that reverence which transforms death into life.

May each day you remember the gaze of God which formed you and the power of the Holy Spirit which inspires the fruits of your character. And may we all know the power of God which can do infinitely more than we can do alone.