

“Full to the Brim: You Are Worthy”  
Luke 13:6-9

If someone were to ask you, “What is your net worth?” What would normally come to your mind? We would often think of our possessions and income. So basically people’s worth is directly tied to what we own, consume, or produce. I recently watched the movie, “Worth” which deals with the compensation for the victims of the 9/11 victims. “The film opens with [Kenneth Feinberg](#) detailing the law's recognition of the monetary value of a person's life to his class at [Columbia University](#). Some time later, the [September 11 attacks](#) occur. Feinberg is appointed the Special Master of the [September 11th Victim Compensation Fund](#) while his law partner, Camille Biros, is appointed as his administrative deputy. Feinberg develops a rigid formula for each payout based on the victim's income, and is instructed that if he cannot convince at least 80 percent of the 7,000 estimated victims to sign on then they will be eligible to file a lawsuit which they may lose (as well as the pressure from the political administrations to save the airlines from being sued, leading to financial disaster). Feinberg is given until December 22, 2003 to accomplish this.” (Wikipedia: [Worth \(film\) - Wikipedia](#)). Here is an overview of this movie with Michael Keaton:

<https://youtu.be/WFNZf48EHSw>

The movie deals with a very difficult subject. What is the worth of a human life? Until the lawyer got to care about the individual lives of each person represented in this case, he could not really accomplish his work. The movie shows that each human life had so much worth in terms of relationships, connections, and impact and that could not be reduced to a simple formula.

On a deep level we know this truth in our bones and yet we live in a world where the illusion of worth is only tied to material wealth, consumption, or production. We often get sucked into that illusion thinking that we have to be loveable, productive, or rich in order to feel that our lives are worth something. This is the kind of mentality Charles Dickens sought to expose in his “Christmas Carol,” when he wrote this line which miserly scrooge said about the poor: “If they would rather die, they’d better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

When God imagined each of us, God saw our potential and worth! Even when we forget our worth, God does not. The work of Jesus here on earth was to wake people up to the reality of divine grace that permeates all of life. He faced difficult challenges, which he turned into great lessons. During the season of Lent we often highlight stories that call us to turn and reclaim God’s abundance and grace in a world that is often dogged by scarcity and fear.

And so we turn to Jesus and his wisdom about our worth to God. Jesus was faced with a difficult question according to Luke 13. A group of people came to Jesus telling him about the victims of a certain painful event thinking that those who died were more sinful than others. This was the massacre of some Galileans by Pilate where he ordered the killing of people who were offering their sacrifices at the temple. Their blood ended up getting mixed with the animal sacrifices offered in the temple. This was a major desecration of the altar at the temple in Jerusalem. It was also a very cruel thing to do to people from Jesus' own region, Galilee. Jesus challenged their way of thinking about human worth. He challenged them by asking whether the people who were massacred deserved what happened to them. Let's listen to how Jesus masterfully redefines human worth according to Luke 13:6-9:

<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 round 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."

Jesus invited the people who came to him to repent and turn away from the ways of thinking that blamed the victims or blamed God, and thus the ways that devalued human worth. In order to get them to see beyond the limits of their old ways of thinking and believing, he also told them a parable. Parables were Jesus' preferred way of teaching because they shocked people and turned their old or "normal" ways of thinking upside down. In this parable about the fig tree, the big shock came from the fact that the owner of the land expected fruit out of a young tree which was not supposed to produce until it matured. Most of the time fig trees produce fruit after at least 3 to 4 years of being planted. Sometimes, it even takes 6 years before a fig tree carries figs. In addition, this fig tree was planted in a vineyard which would have made it hard for it to produce fruit. Fig trees are very common in the Middle East. So, it would have been unheard of and even unreasonable for the owner to come expecting fruit the first, second and third years. Then he threatened to cut the tree down, even though he would have known that it was just not the time for the tree to produce fruit.

What the original listeners would have heard and understood is the connection between the behavior of Pilate and the landowner. Pilate was unreasonable. He was expecting people to pay unbearable taxes to the Empire without complaining or questioning. The unreasonable landowner represented all the hard things in life that come at us without good reason such as natural disasters, oppressive governments, abusive relationships, and ill health. What Jesus gave the people in the parable was the example of the gardener. He saw the potential in the tree. He pleaded for its life and worth. He promised to nurture it. He saw worth beyond production and financial gain. The gardener is a good example of how God sees us. God is patient, loving, persistent, and nourishing. Instead of blaming the landowner or the tree, the gardener did what he could to care for the tree. He saw the potential and knew that the worth of the tree was still there.

Rev. Sarah Are Speed expresses this sentiment so beautifully in her poem “What I Forgot”:

Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree.  
No fruit here, just soaking up the sun,  
growing roots, turning green,  
stretching out my branches until  
I can hug the horizon.  
Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree,  
because she doesn't produce,  
and she's not exhausted,  
and she probably gets eight hours  
of sleep at night.  
And her branches,  
unlike my shoulders,  
are not heavy with work—  
pulled toward the ground,  
threatening to break.  
And her trunk,  
unlike my spine,  
is not fighting to stand tall  
while holding it all together.  
Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree  
because she knows  
what I forgot  
many years ago.

You are still worthy  
even if  
you don't produce.

We are going to look at this story from the perspective of an artist: Alexey Pismenny in his Parable of the Fruitless Fig Tree.



This reflection is adapted from Daniella Zsupan-Jerome:

Through a contemporary style that pays homage to orthodox icons, Alexey Pismenny depicts the Parable of the Fruitless Fig Tree in a composition of three related scenes. Each of these scenes is a moment in Luke's Gospel, chapter 13. The narrative begins with the top left scene of Pilate overseeing an execution. It then moves across to the right, to the scene of the collapsing tower at Siloam about to crush its victims. True to the fashion of traditional icons, both of these scenes are symbolic, rather than literal—they offer us just enough detail to recall the story told more fully in Luke.

In the foreground of the painting, we encounter Christ the Teacher, flanked by the fig tree and the man threatening to cut it down. Christ steps in to intercept and to offer a lesson, as he stands in the traditional teaching pose with one hand raised in instruction. There is a profound lesson in the juxtaposition here of teaching and violence, reinforced by the perfect alignment of Christ's teaching hand and the lowered axe head. Instead of strong-arming the figure with the axe, Jesus leads him to see another way through the wisdom of his words.

The depiction of the fig tree offers us an image of hope. It is no longer the barren fig tree that stands accused. Rather it has already been tended to by Christ—the spade and bucket rest by the trunk of the tree already having been used to bring the tree back to life. Signs of life spring forth as leaves sprout from the gnarled branches. This tree is going to live and bear fruit, because Christ has given it life.

The composition of these three scenes calls us to see human worth in God's eyes against the lack of worth people inflict on each other. The two background scenes remind us of the destruction that comes from not valuing the potential and worth in each human. Jesus gives us a vision for what is possible.

Take a long loving look at this painting and let God speak to you about where you see yourself in this story. What is the message for you today?

**The Master Gardener (adapted from By Vinita Hampton Wright):**

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your memory as you recall events that you wish had never happened. Some of them involve words you spoke or actions you took that you now regret. Some of these events were beyond your control, yet they affected you, and they were not pleasant—perhaps they were even harmful.

Do not ask why these things happened. Do not try to figure out if they had a purpose. Simply place these memories before Jesus the Christ, trusting in his mercy.

Watch as Jesus digs a circular trench. The trench surrounds a tree that is but a few years old. In this trench Jesus buries your regrets and covers them with soft, rich soil. He weeps as he works, and his tears water the ground that feeds this growing tree. You realize then that the tree is you—it is your life with all its history and all its possibilities. This tree is you, growing every day, facing storms and extreme temperatures, soaking up sunshine and rain.

And now you understand: although you have the freedom to choose and sometimes you choose unwisely, Jesus has committed to tending your life. Stay rooted in God's mercy and let Jesus make certain you flourish and bear fruit. Let yourself be in the hands of the master gardener. Let go of your regrets. Trust the skill and love of the One who will not give up on you. You are worthy! Praise be! Amen.