

(*Scriptures for today's liturgy*)

Bushes Burning and Barren
(*Homily for the Third Sunday of Lent*)

So...

"What shall we do with a barren fig tree?"

Feel the cadence in that line?
Does it remind you of something?
Maybe a *camp song* - one you probably wouldn't sing in church -
unless you changed the lyrics...

*What shall we do with a barren fig tree?
What shall we do with a barren fig tree?
What shall we do with a barren fig tree,
earl-y in the morning?*

*"Chop it down!" said the orchard owner,
"Chop it down!" said the orchard owner,
"Chop it down!" said the orchard owner,
earl-y in the morning!*

*"Let it be..." said the patient gardener...
"Let it be..." said the patient gardener...
"Let it be..." said the patient gardener...
earl-y in the morning!*

*Each of us is a barren fig tree,
Each of us is a barren fig tree,
Each of us is a barren fig tree,
earl-y in the morning!*

*Jesus is the patient gardener,
Jesus is the patient gardener,
Jesus is the patient gardener,
earl-y in the morning!*

In Jesus' day, raising a fig tree took some time.
After planting the tree,
you'd have to let it grow for about *three years*
before it bore any fruit.
And once it did, you couldn't eat the figs for *another* three years
because of dietary laws in the Book of Leviticus.
In the *seventh* year, the figs on the tree could be picked
but they had to be brought to the temple
as a thanksgiving offering to God.

Now, the orchard owner in the gospel story has been looking for figs to harvest for three years which means he's been waiting on this tree for a long time - and he's good and ready to chop it down.

But the *gardener* is patient, asking for *just one more year* to nurture this fig tree to harvest.

- I wonder...
has anyone been as patient with you as was this gardener with the barren fig tree?

- I wonder...
have you and I ever been as patient with another person (a child, a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a co-worker, a friend...) as the gardener was with the fig tree?

A definite target of this parable as Jesus preached it were the religious leaders of his own day, so...

- I wonder...
how patient is the Church, how patient is its leadership - from Rome to Boston to Concord?
Is the Church sometimes too quick to cut down "trees" needing time to be nurtured to fruitfulness?

When any of us experiences the patience Jesus counsels here, then we experience what it is to be truly loved...

And when any of us patiently cares for another, as Jesus counsels here, then we know what it is to truly love someone...

The patience for which the parable calls can make great demands on us:
patience in the face of carelessness, forgetfulness and hurt;
patience in the face of rejection and infidelity;
patience in the face of fruitlessness;
patience in the face of disappointment and discouragement;
patience like this is a prime quality of love.

It's the patience parents often naturally have with their children...
It's the patience promised in wedding vows...
It's the patience of a teacher with a student...
It's the patience of teammates working towards the same goal...
It's the patience of co-workers understanding each other's stress...

It's the patience that keeps good friends, true friends, old friends...
And it's the patience the Lord has with each of us
when we ignore, squander and take for granted
the love he patiently suffered for us on the Cross...

Jesus is the patient gardener in the parable
and just as patiently he cultivates his grace
in my life, in yours and in the life of the Church
-- and he's doing that even, and especially,
when we are bearing no fruit.

How long will he be patient with us?
Look at the burning bush!
the Lord's patience with us burns like a heart afire --
but it's never consumed, never exhausted: it never gives up on us.
The Lord's loving heart burns bright for us always,
ever warming us with his light and mercy and pardon.
The flame of his patient love for us never goes out, it never dies.

Lent is a season for us to remember
how we have failed to patiently love one another
(child, spouse, parent, sibling, co-worker, teacher, student,
parishioner, neighbor, stranger, friend)...

And Lent is a season to remember
how patiently the Lord has loved us:
how patiently he gardens the orchards of our lives,
ever hopeful for the harvest he calls us to yield.

Sunday after Sunday, Lent after Lent,
in spite of our forgetfulness, our faults
and even our failure to bear fruit,
the Lord sets this table for us
where he patiently cultivates his love in us
through the gift of his altar, the Eucharist,
in the fire of his presence in the Holy Spirit.

May this be the day, may this be the Lent
of the Lord's harvest in our lives.

*What shall we do with a barren fig tree?
"Chop it down!" said the orchard owner.
"Let it be..." said the patient gardener,
early in the morning!*

- Rev. Austin H. Fleming