



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**"Patient Grace"** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

March 24, 2019; Third Sunday in Lent

Reading: Luke 13:6-9; "Patient Trust" by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ

I blame my parents. One of my earliest memories is helping my mom plant portulaca in the flowerbed along our drive. Everyone knew they were keen gardeners. Their vegetable plot ran along the hedge - in our front yard. I'm keen too, which means one of the great gifts of moving back to Ontario is that when March 21 arrives it looks like spring rather than there being a foot of snow outside. An earlier spring start means I have a longer time getting my hands in the soil.

As a gardener, I appreciate today's gospel and the quandary it offers. How many gardeners have effectively been the landowner and gardener at once, of two minds about a plant that isn't doing as it ought? Do I leave it or take drastic action? Now before we judge the landowner too harshly, we need to consider that it was forbidden to pick fruit from a newly fruiting tree for three years and the first allowable harvest was an offering to G-d. Given this, the tree might be eight to ten years old. That makes the landowner's desire to replace the tree understandable. As is the request of the gardener. She's tended to this tree for many years, watching it grow from a tiny seedling into maturity. Perhaps it just needs a bit more love and attention? This is where the story ends - with a gardener doing what she can and an owner accepting it even though it's ridiculous to try.

I find this parable reassuring, especially when I recall that Luke placed it in a larger storyline of Jesus teaching about the end-time. If I give into the temptation to make the characters theological stand ins, then I have an image of divine patience. The commonly held belief in the early church was the Risen Christ was returning soon. It was how they reconciled their assumption that the Messiah was supposed to usher in a new age of peace and justice; yet the militaristic, unjust empire was strong as ever. The parable seems to capture the tension. Perhaps the gardener and owner are both G-d, weighing the pros and cons of starting over or taking more time. Now for us, nineteen hundred years from Luke's writing, it seems the owner-gardener debate continues. Which says a lot about holy patience. And says a great deal about what exactly we're waiting for.

This is where Pierre Teilhard de Chardin offers insight. As a paleontologist he appreciated the fossil record of evolution and as a geologist understood the vast time periods involved in that process. Talk about the slow work of G-d. As a priest he combined science and theology, noting that with each evolutionary era we've not just increased in complexity but in consciousness. He proposed a spiritual end point to this evolving cosmos where we will shift beyond individual consciousness to eventual divine union. Spiral dynamics theory offers similar insight into human history. Ken Wilber and others propose that over time we've moved from one level to another, from tribalism up to an embracing of multiple groups into a whole. At a recent talk I attended, Adam Chapnick alluded to this. He spoke of Canadian multiculturalism and how we adopted our policy after World War II when people started to embrace human rights more broadly. I pray each of these thinkers is right.

After the shocking attack in Christchurch I need this to be true, that we'll finally see ourselves as connected beyond our own circle into one global family.

If we return to the parable, this shift is effectively taking on a gardener's eye. If a gardener wants her plants to thrive, she doesn't just see individuals. She knows that carrots love tomatoes and that broccoli doesn't play well with others. She knows that corn, beans and squash when planted together produce more than each apart. And she looks beneath the surface. She knows a garden is not just about plants, that there's an ecosystem of insects, worms, fungi and many other creatures sharing that world, all necessary for the soil to be healthy. She sees an interconnected community rather than just commodities to be used. To my mind this way of seeing the world will save us.

So how do we get there given that despite Teilhard's and Wilber's assertions it feels like we are heading backwards? Part of it is patience on our part, as Teilhard suggests. Given it is nineteen hundred years and counting, perhaps our early Christian forebears misunderstood the type of age Jesus was speaking about, that the Risen Christ wasn't bringing an external kingdom but an inner transformation over time. It grows and can't be forced, evolving as we reach one tipping point after another. For example, one level in spiral dynamics is shared community focused on peace and caring for others. This gained traction in the 60's but as we realize issues are more complex, we may be moving to one that values openness to many beliefs and acknowledges the need for multiple solutions. This view is less human centric, recognizing that we're part of a wider whole.

These ideas suggest there is patient grace at play but we don't need to be passive. Luke places the parable in the context not just of end-times teaching but of repentance. We often react negatively to the word but it's not about judgement. It's adopting a new perspective. Here the detail of the gardener preparing the soil comes to bear. If Jesus is the gardener, which Luke may have been suggesting, then working the soil is his ministry which leads to the cross. Taking on a new mind has a cruciform orientation as we die to habitual ways of thinking so we can embrace something more vital. We have seasons like Lent to be intentionally reflective where we embrace the cross through practices like fasting and meditation. But soul searching is not just limited to Lent. Life events also prompt reflection, especially when they bring the cross to our hearts. For example, events of the past week may prompt reflection about one's prejudices, especially about Muslims. We can prayerfully seek guidance in this regard. Perhaps someone has retired and feels unsure how to find purpose or meaning. This may be a time to ponder what it means to simply be rather than do in a world focused on work and success. Perhaps someone feels anxiety over the climate. This may be time for an activity inventory to see where they can live more sustainably. Whatever the life event, in the end it means taking time to let go so that we can begin to live in a new way.

As I often say, this isn't easy to do. Thankfully Jesus' parable and the reflection of Teilhard de Chardin remind us to be patient. It takes time to coax the fig trees of our lives to bear fruit. But they will. In this time of increasing light and warming days, as the landscape around us becomes green and the seeds beneath the soil die to produce new life, may we too do the same. Amen.