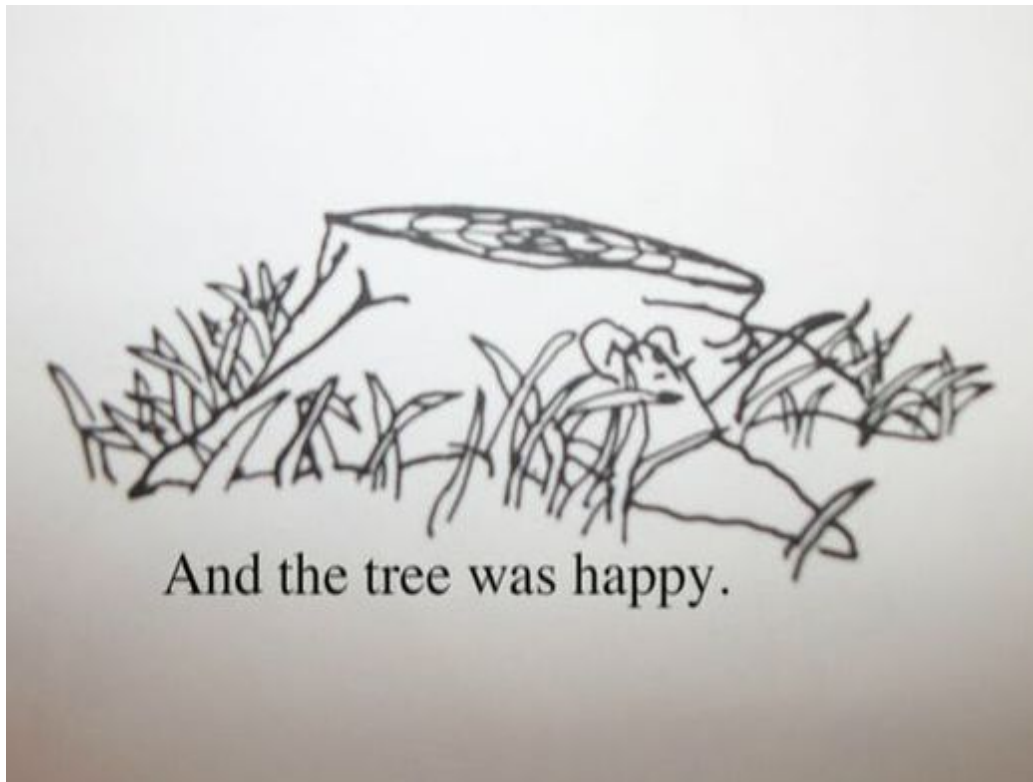


# The UNgiving Tree

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Preaching on:

Luke 13:6–9

“Once there was a tree... and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest.” How many of you recognize that? Those are the opening lines of one of the most popular and celebrated children’s books of all time, *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. You’re familiar with it, right?

And this book has many fans. Many fans. You may be one of them, yeah? So, it is with some trepidation that I confess to you all that I am not a fan of *The Giving Tree*. I think its story sends us all the wrong messages about giving. And this morning we’re going to talk about those messages in order to help us understand the meaning of Jesus’ parable from our scripture reading this morning, which I’m calling The Parable of the Ungiving Tree.

Now the reason we’re talking about all this this Sunday is because we’re nearing the end of our church’s Stewardship Season, which this year we’ve themed “Cultivating Community.” Next Sunday is

Consecration Sunday, so we're asking you over the next week to really think about what you can give to this community in 2023, we're asking you to write it down on your pledge card, and we're asking you to bring it to church next Sunday for a blessing. If you're not here on Sunday, you can mail us your card or just pledge online, but we want all your pledges in by Sunday, so this is the week to decide if and how and why you are going to give to our community.

Giving is always good, right? *The Giving Tree* starts out OK, as you heard. The tree loves the boy, and the boy loves the tree. The boy climbs the tree, swings in the tree, plays with the tree, sleeps in the tree, hugs the tree. And the tree is happy.

But as the boy grows things take a turn. The boy is distracted by his expanding life and the tree is left all alone. When the boy finally returns to the tree he doesn't want to play anymore. He wants money. So the tree offers her apples to the boy so he can sell them and make money. He takes all her apples and leaves her all alone again.

Much later, the boy returns and now he wants a family. So the tree offers all her branches so the boy can build a house. And he takes them all. The boy returns again as an older man and wants to go on a voyage, so the tree offers her trunk so he can make a boat out of it.

Now this tree, once full of leaves and apples and swinging branches and life and joy, has been reduced to a stump. And the boy returns one last time as an old man, looking for a place to rest. And the stump that was once his beloved tree offers him a seat on top of her. And the final image of the book is an old man sitting on a stump, staring off into the blank emptiness of the page. And the text next to it reads, "And the tree was happy." Really?

So, I have to ask, what kind of love is this exactly? Is this supposed to be a model for our relationship to nature? We can just take and take and take? Strip mine the mountains, pollute the atmosphere, overfish the oceans, and clear cut the forests. And when we've killed our happy planet, we'll just what—sit content on the stumps of the earth? Where's the Lorax when you need him? Somebody needs to speak for the trees!

But this is the fundamental flaw of *The Giving Tree*—the Giving Tree has no needs other than wanting to give. And that's a dangerous fantasy. There is no such thing as a tree or a friend or a wife or a husband or a planet or a church or anything else that only wants to give you what you want and does everything to make you happy without needing anything in return. Does NOT exist.

What about parenthood? Maybe parenthood feels like this sometimes. But if Bonnie is ever an old stump of a woman, exhausted from giving her all to her family, and then her grown son comes along because he wants something instead of showing up to care for her, I will know that I have failed to teach my son some pretty important lessons about love and respect and honor. Even your mother

needs something in return.

*I Love You Forever* is my favorite children's book about mothers and sons. The mother gives so much care and love to her son, but at the end of the book when she's old and sick her son returns the care she gave to him to her. Then he goes home and he rocks and he sings to his baby daughter just like he had been rocked and sung to when he was growing up. Because part of growing up is learning to give back and to pay it forward—messages painfully absent at the stump end of *The Giving Tree*.

And so some people say that it's true that no person, no planet even, can love you like this. No, earthly mother can love you like this, but your heavenly father can. Doesn't God give us everything? And doesn't God love us no matter what? And didn't Jesus die for our sins? Well, yes and no.

The boy in this story gets everything he asks for, but it costs him nothing. And that's not how God works. God's grace is not cheap. Cheap grace is the kind of grace that gives and gives and gives without ever asking anything of us in return. But the grace of the Gospel is transformational grace—grace that demands—from within our own hearts and souls—that we change, that we sacrifice, that we confess, that we forgive, that we reconcile, that we care for one another, that we care for the least of these. The boy in *The Giving Tree* he grows, but he never grows up. Even when he's an old man the book it just calls him "the boy." He doesn't change. The tree gives the boy everything he wants without requiring him to grow up, to give back, or to pay it forward.

Just imagine how healthy it would have been for this bratty man-child to have heard that tree say, "NO." Imagine what might have happened then in that discomfort.

And so we come to Jesus' Parable of the Ungiving Tree. The boy shows up at the tree wanting some figs instead of apples this time. And the tree says, "NO! NO FIGS FOR YOU!" And the boy storms off. He comes back the next year and still no figs. And the next year same thing! He's indignant! "This tree of mine that I have neglected except to come and demand figs of it when I am suddenly in the mood for figs is not meeting my needs! CHOP IT DOWN!"

If we're being honest, we all have this boy inside of us to some extent. This boy has ruined marriages and friendships, caused us to yell at millions of perfectly polite customer service representatives just trying to do their jobs, and to do even crazier things—I recently got furiously mad at a new diaper pail Bonnie bought because I didn't think it was designed well enough. That's right. I didn't think a pail was designed well enough for me to throw my baby's poop in. This boy inside of us, he thinks he's hot stuff, but really, he's a ridiculous child.

Luckily for us, this is where Jesus shows us his alternative to demanding that the world suit our needs. When the boy who owns the vineyard tells his worker working in the vineyard to cut down the tree, this worker, this gardener begs for more time. Let me care for this tree. Let me fertilize it. Let me give it

what it needs so that it can produce figs for everyone.

The part of us that wants figs and wants them now is always a little louder. That's why he owns the vineyard. But all of us have this other voice in us as well. And though it may be quieter, and less powerful, Jesus tells us that the gardener's way is our true destiny as Christians. Because Christians don't give up. We don't lose hope. We don't make demands—we give ourselves over to God's will and we act for God's Realm. We don't think only of ourselves. We dedicate ourselves to serving others. We get our hands dirty. We don't just consume the figs. We cultivate the figs.

As you consider your pledge for 2023 over this final week of stewardship season, don't think of it as trying to cover what you have consumed. Think of it as empowering our church to grow and to thrive beyond your personal needs. Give because your neighbors have needs. Give because this church has needs.

Because there's no such thing as the giving tree. You can't be one. And neither can your church. If you're going to be a part of this church, you should know that there's a chance that one day you're going to need figs, and you're going to show up to church looking for figs, and there won't be any figs. There are three possible responses: 1. You can hope it was just a bad day and come looking for figs some other time. 2. You can move on to another church and hope that that church is a true giving tree and that it has all the resources that it needs to always meet your need for figs. 3. With the hunger for figs in your mouth, you can join Jesus at the roots of this tree, with your hands in the dirt, and you can cultivate your community.