

**Loving Patience**  
(Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9)

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Today's readings help us to think about two closely intertwined virtues that are much needed in these difficult times. One is the ability to forgive others for what they have not done and the other is patience.

Forgiving is hard when we witness to, or are the victim of, an intentionally hurtful action. But what is perhaps easier to miss and sometimes harder to forgive are the "sins of omission;" the failure of others or of ourselves to do the right thing, when it is most needed.

I say harder to forgive, because "sins of omission" can be a failure to act that can go on for years, like one long sin that builds and grows over time. They can fester into unshakeable grudges or become a kind of paralysis. And because no one likes to be in the wrong, the failure to act over time will generate some kind of cover story that distorts the sinner's ability to see clearly. And the sinner may refuse or fail to take corrective action, even when it is in everyone's interest, including their own, to do so.

It's hard to forgive a person or even a larger group, for driving you insane through years of not doing what needs to be done. And so we

ask God's forgiveness, not just for the wrongs we have done, but for the good things we have left undone.

### **The Food Metaphor**

This morning's first reading concerns itself with our failure to act rightly by talking about food. It is as though Isaiah were a nutritionist or perhaps Mom at the dinner table, asking us "Why do you go to so much trouble to eat food that doesn't nourish you; food that will only make you weak and unhealthy? Why do you do this, when I am pointing you toward an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables; delicious food that will lay the foundation for a healthy life?"

I'm sure that, to a person who is already in the habit of eating good food, it's a no-brainer. Eating healthy opens you up to a whole new existence, the likes of which you can't imagine, without having been there. I imagine that this is how God feels when serving up for us a healthy menu of life-giving wisdom and guidance, with which we can thrive and find a shared peace and joy beyond our imagining. And yet, in spite of God's clear guidance, we respond by looking up in confusion and saying, "No thanks. I'll stick with my current diet of empty calories. You want me to eat fruit and vegetables? Your ways are not my ways!"

So we can look at this passage from two perspectives. When we identify with God as the server, it is easy to see where the discipline of learning how to forgive comes in. If we were in God's shoes, we would be understandably upset and resentful after offering our children what we know they need and over and over again, having them dismiss our offer out of hand; simply continuing to eat poorly and reaping an increasingly poor health outcome. We might even become so upset that we want to just throw the food in their face and walk away.

But we can also interpret this passage and this morning's Gospel using Jesus's principle "Look at the log in your own eye, before directing attention to the speck in the eye of the other." In other words, by considering the ways in which we ourselves may be the one who have failed to act; that we ourselves may be the ones who have refused the good food that God sets before us. Or that we are the trees that have failed to deliver good fruit.

### **Applying the Metaphor**

The subject of "not doing" can sound rather light-hearted and humorous when we are talking about eating habits, but it is very serious and consequential matter.

When I was flying down to Puerto Rico, we stopped in Miami. And as we slowly descended over the long strip of hotels along South Beach with all the nearby peninsulas and waterways, I thought about the advice of scientists that the water level will be rising to disastrous levels if we hold to current levels of CO2 emissions.

And yet, we fail to listen. We prefer to do whatever will allow us to avoid facing the reality that has been set before us, so that we can go on as before.

As the plane descended into Miami, my heart continued its familiar struggle between having trouble forgiving the lack of action by those in power, forgiving the apathy of those who put them there, and knowing that I too stand convicted. How can I condemn anyone for what will happen to the city below when I, by virtue of buying my seat on the plane am buying into the very thing I decry. I too am in need of a forgiveness that I am so reluctant to extend to others

The seriousness of our inaction is greater yet, when it comes to the general state our country and world is in today. I say this because I believe that much of what we have been burdened with in recent years

was largely unnecessary and directly attributable to our failure to do the good we should have done, but failed to do.

We have failed to properly nurture and educate the general population, so that today our citizenry increasingly lacks the tools they need to interpret information and lacks the ability to choose legitimate leaders. And when it is time to vote, great numbers of people blow it off.

And so, the best and brightest or most devoted public servants have been subordinated to people at the top who don't belong there. Does anyone think that Donald Trump, or for that matter, Joe Biden are really the best we can put forward for the central role as Commander in Chief? Does anybody really think our representative government is really representing us in any fair way? Our "sins of omission" have crippling us and are depriving us of our ability to fulfill our noblest aspirations.

### **The Point**

My point is that our failure to act; the failure to be "trees that bear good fruit" has tragic consequences. And there is no more human response than to look around for someone to punish. There is a harsh punitive sentiment in the air today that is expressed well in the words

of owner of the fig tree in our Gospel reading, when he orders “Cut it down! Cut it down! Feeding it is a waste of soil.”

**But,** then come what are perhaps the most important words in the story. They come from the gardener, who sees things a little differently. “Give it another year and I will add manure to it,” he says. “Then, if it doesn’t bear fruit, cut it down.” The gardener is recommending that, for the time being, forgiveness be the course of action. And his recommendation is rooted in a more long term view.

### **Fig Tree in a Vineyard**

One of the important details in the story that is often missed is that the fig tree happens to be planted in a vineyard. And the commentaries latch onto this fact, suggesting that the fig tree and its fruit is to be compared the growing of grapes.

Grapes vines produce quickly and soon provide a yield that is mouthwatering and immediately refreshing. Fig trees, by comparison, take several years of growth before they yield and require much patience. But when they do yield, their fruit, while not so brightly flavorful, is more subtle and rich in nutrients. And the gardener knows this.

And so, if we apply this story more broadly, it counsels us to avoid being too hasty in our judgements, because some of the best things take time. And we should be careful about judging things on the basis of their surroundings.

Every good grade school teacher knows this truth from working with students who seem to show little potential, compared with their peers, but who years later come back, having yielding much good fruit, to say “thank you for being patient with me.”

### **Patience in an Age of Condemnation**

I think that the Parable of the Fig Tree is counselling us to be patient in a way that is hard to reconcile with where we are today. All the crises in our world are calling for our immediate attention and for dramatic results. We want action and we want results. And we want it now!

But I tend to agree with the gardener. You cannot force good fruit from a person or even from a society until it has gone through the growth that renders it ready to deliver, and that takes time. So that, in my view, it is better to continue working faithfully, lovingly in the service of

a truth that will deliver fruit as yet unseen, than it is to resort to force and try to make something a reality that cannot happen before its time.

And it is such a great blessing to know that, in spite of our own failings, we belong to a God who never ceases to be eager to give us another chance.

we apply it to what is happening in the Ukraine. Our future is literally in the hands of an exceedingly evil man who literally has the power to end everything in a nuclear holocaust. What he is doing is beyond unforgiveable.

But then again, he is not the only one who is guilty. There are his enablers who, seeing their own self-interest involved, allowed or

helped to give him the absolute power that he now wields. And then there are the Russian people. I don't know how much of the responsibility for what is happening lies with them, because it seems clear that they are being duped.