

The barren fig tree

(*Luke 13:6-9*)

“He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.”

At first sight this parable may seem like a version of “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again.” But that is not so. A gardener who notes a tree or shrub which has not been doing well does not merely carry on for another year as he has already been doing; he says to himself, “If it has been dormant all this time, I must do something active about it.” And so if we find no fruitage in our lives, we must disrupt the complacency of our thought and get active in the directions indicated in the story. The healthy process of getting down to the roots of the situation and analyzing and uncovering the error (symbolized by the digging) and then truly annihilating it through the invigorating process of Truth and Love in consciousness (symbolized by the dunging) has always been the way that leads to fruitage in every walk of life.

The man with the barren fig tree is any of us who have a sincere sense of Principle and expect results in Science, but are not at first willing to get down to the necessary work symbolized by the digging round and the manuring.

The argument may come to someone when frustration overwhelms him, “Why should I go on trying in Science? I do my best and I

study and think, but it seems to have no effect. I might as well give it all up." It often appears to the individual that no resurrection process is taking place in his experience and he is tempted by mortal mind to throw in the sponge or yield to discouragement. Jesus is showing through this story that we should accept that Principle is doing its work in its own way, but that we have our part to play.

Since Principle is ever active in the experience of man and is often more at work when we are not aware of it than when we are, a preparative phase is taking place in which the individual is being prepared in character-expression to reach some form of fruition in his life. Because of the nature of Principle, it is impossible for this not to be going on.

This process is represented here by the "three years," which does not refer to a period of time but to movements in consciousness, irrespective of the time they may appear to occupy before breaking surface. "Three" has perennially stood as an important symbol of the process of ascending thought. Jesus' three-year mission was a process of ascending thought towards the challenge of the crucifixion, and his three days in the sepulchre again symbolized ascending thought, rising above the claims of death and materialism to the extent that on the third day he resurrected himself from that whole condition. Only Soul-sense can show us that there is a process to divine unfoldment and yet it has no time element.

The preparative process, represented by the three years, often goes on unknown to us. If we accept that Principle is working through us and for us in our character-revealing, we are wise if, instead of yielding to discouragement, thereby throwing away the work already done, we acknowledge that the work is going on and that we are therefore ready for the fruitage of whatever is best for our progress. We must then admit the necessity of two distinct processes, represented by the digging and the dunging. First there is the digging about, which reveals the truths of our rootage in Principle and enables us to see and dig out all that is unlike Principle. Then there is the dunging, which means the application of warmth and encouragement in a measure which brings home these truths to consciousness, so stimu-

lating thought that the expectancy of good takes over where doubt and disappointment may once have prevailed. This true expectancy allows the good to operate in experience and bring the fruitage which is natural and will always come when the errors of suggestion to the contrary are removed through this very process of encouragement and revelation. "Thus abiding in Truth, the warmth and sunlight of prayer and praise and understanding will ripen the fruits of Spirit" (Mis.331:8-10). We should be alert never to allow any footing to the argument that Principle will not complete its work in our experience and bring what is covered here by the term "fruit." The determination to be loyal to Principle and what it means will assuredly bring the experience of fulfilment.

The vine-dresser in the story did not concern himself with the branches of the fig tree, but with the roots — the heart of the matter was there. We sometimes make the mistake of continually looking with dismay at the lack of fruitage, instead of getting down to the digging and dunging which will naturally and inevitably produce the fruitage. It is necessary to dig around and reveal the very roots of our being in the Principle which has us as its expression and allow this to analyze and uncover whatever is obstructive. We are rooted in Principle and nothing can uproot us, but it is because of this that we can go to Principle for clarification and procedure and not only see plainly where we are failing to express Principle, but also how to express that which we are and obey the mandate of Principle to *do* so.

So if, instead of losing heart, we would realize what Principle is doing to us and through us — that healing is going on and is there awaiting acceptance — and if we would dig about and uncover the errors which are holding up the operation of Principle in our experience and go on to animate the truths of our being with the warmth of Love, we would have fruitage without any doubt.

Digging penetrates the soil of human thought with an approach so sincere that everything is examined in the light of the measuring-rod of Principle. Moreover, with this approach we not only wake up to where we are falling short, but also go on to see that it is put right. We should challenge ourselves to find out why we are not being fruit-

ful, just as the disciples did when they asked their Master why it was that they had not been able to heal the epileptic boy, whereas he had. He replied, "This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29). This must have laid bare to them the demands of Science which they were not meeting, because they were indulging in a sort of easy Science, sitting under the umbrella of Jesus. For "prayer" let us bear in mind that Jesus' "humble prayers were deep and conscientious protests of Truth, — of man's likeness to God and of man's unity with Truth and Love" (S&H 12:13-15). And for "fasting" we can recall Mrs Eddy's Christmas message to her household to have "a famine of sense" (My.263:6-7); this is a determined process of the denial of sense testimony. It means recognizing a lie as a lie and then resolving not to let it influence us in any way — to reject it out of hand, even if this requires being tough with ourselves. The manure, which the vine-dresser saw the fig tree crying out for, represents the essential enrichment which takes place when we "pour in truth through flood-tides of Love" (S&H 201:17-18), which carry all before them. Mrs Eddy says that this is the way to extract error from mortal mind. Because "Love is the liberator" (S&H 225:21-22), we can never go wrong if we say, "I love this truth because it is the truth. I love myself because I have seen it and loved it. And I love the Principle which gave me both the truth and my love for it." Truth is often brilliantly seen, but it is Love which imparts the consistent devotion which stays with the truth until it fills the entire picture.

The process of digging may not be pleasant to a sensual wish to be left alone with everything as it is, so we should face this reluctance and recognize it as a tool of mortal mind. But if we have the desire for what might be called "real gutsy stuff" and we do not care what is laid bare which should be exposed, something healthy and progressive is under way, and a tremendous amount may come to light. For instance, we may find that although we long for health, an honest examination shows that ill-health occupies most of the ground in our thinking and we are not starting from the basic spiritual fact of health or wholeness and then seeing to it that we are identifying ourselves

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with health through having strong, clear, healthy thinking about ourselves, our family and friends, our position, our nation, and so on; we are not honestly accepting what we profess of the omnipotence and omnipresence of God and maybe we do not even really believe healing to be possible.

Perhaps we may find a lack of love in our outlook. The rootings of our love are often too much on the surface, and we need to go deeper to make sure that our motives are properly rooted in Principle. Once we have our rootings right, dunging takes place in the sense that the growth of our love is stimulated by a flow of inspiration. For instance, if "I love him" is followed by "Of course I do, because Principle is expressing itself as me and I am joining in with the love of Principle for him," this dunging that love into wonderful growth, and there is constant unfolding of its real meaning. Then it will not be frail or vulnerable love, but a sturdy plant.

Some idea of the penetration which Love inspires is given by the statement, "Divine Love, as unconscious as incapable of error, pursues the evil that hideth itself, strips off its disguises, and — behold the result: evil, uncovered, is self-destroyed" (Mis.209:32-3).

Mrs Eddy also writes, "Examine yourselves, and see what, and how much, sin claims of you; and how much of this claim you admit as valid, or comply with. The knowledge of evil that brings on repentance is the most hopeful stage of mortal mentality." But she shows too that mortals must hasten through these preliminary stages to the knowledge of good, "for without this the valuable sequence of knowledge would be lacking, — even the power to escape from the false claims of sin. To understand good, one must discern the nothingness of evil, and consecrate one's life anew" (Mis.109:8-12,24-27).

The answer to the question "How can I progress most rapidly in the understanding of Christian Science?" reads, in part, "Ask yourself: Am I living the life that approaches the supreme good?" (S&H 496:9-10). The genuine asking of that question to see how one's life does measure up to the requirements of the one Self or Principle will certainly subject it to stringent scrutiny. The answers may sometimes seem devastating, but they will in any case be stirring and rejuvenat-

ing. They will stimulate and generate ideas previously lying dormant, and this is the true digging and dunging which will yield the fruitage of rapid progress.

Just as dung cannot be spread on hard ground, on a surface which has not been broken up and activated, so it is necessary to break up any hard opinions we may hold, in order to make the roots of our thinking accessible to the health-giving nutriment of Truth. There has to be a stirring and stimulation of thought either from its complacency or its stubborn resistance to Truth. We need to accept Truth for its own sake and because it is Truth. We may have to rebuke a lack of conviction taking form in such sentiments as "I'm no good" or "It's all right for others, but it doesn't apply to me." We must let the clean air of Truth come in around our thinking to refresh and revitalize it. We often have to wake up to what Principle has already done for us and all the blessings and care we have experienced, and then we see that all the years of doing the best we knew have not been wasted.

One could say that the "dresser" is we ourselves addressing our own thought and saying, "I'll look to my roots in Principle and let that show me where the deficiency lies, and then I'll turn my thought to the fact that that Principle is Love and will never leave me without fruitage." This enriches thought, as the acknowledgment of divine Love inevitably does. We must spread this acknowledgment of Love all round our thinking, which through the digging process has been enlivened to receive it.

Discouragement can only come when there is latent growth coming to the point of fruition. The young blade pushing up through the soil must be pushing up or it could not feel the stone on top of it. The stone might be called "a discouragement," but it is a proof of the pushing up which has been taking place throughout the winter. If any man feels discouragement, he can see that it is only the attempt of mortal mind to obstruct and that for obstruction to be present there must be something *to* obstruct. If he were not keen about Science, he would not feel the occasional disheartenment. If we are not climbing a mountain, we cannot be disappointed at not making progress, because we are not climbing! The claim of discouragement is therefore

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proof of progress and of Principle's preparing of us for a demonstration of that progress.

That is why it is essential not to throw in the sponge at the critical time when discouragement tries to hide the fact that victory is near. In the history of the world many brave men and women have been sorely tried by discouragement, but they have been strengthened by remembering the roots of their idealism and by "dunging" their faith and hope. Others have yielded to despair and thrown in the sponge when there was no need to do so.

The sweat which fell on the ground in drops of blood at Gethsemane expressed the fidelity that would *not* throw in the sponge. But the weight of the carnal mind's suggestions of discouragement was much greater than we can realize. Jesus had worked for three years and even those nearest to him were asleep. The rest were an enraged rabble. But his three years' work had brought him to the point where he was fully equipped to accept the truth that all that lay ahead of him was the will of Principle. Thereby he certainly dug around and revealed the roots of that Principle and had the warmth of a divine assurance.

The parable implies that if we do the digging about and the dunging, there is no question about the fruitage. If we fulfil our part, as Principle is always doing its part in us (and we fulfil our part by the analysis, uncovering, and annihilation of anything obstructing Principle), it is certain that there will be fruitage, for the fruitage is already there. Our work is to destroy any lack of acknowledgment of this fact, and this is accomplished both by our performance under the guidance of Principle and our certainty of Principle's presence, the realization of which is the true fruitage.

The man who gave this parable never accepted time as a factor of true experience. The immediacy of the presence and power of God was his standard, as seen in all his work and teaching, the whole of which was summed up in his command to men, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Therefore the three-year period of unfruitfulness was introduced to highlight the need to handle the claim of a time element in which the presence

of good is unrecognized. Jesus is really calling on us to overcome this claim by scientific digging and dunging in order to experience fruitage.

We may believe that everything is inert from the point of view of fruitage in spite of our knowing the truth for three minutes, three hours, three days, three months, three years, or any other period of time, but all that has been happening in our thought is that sense-based arguments have been denying the immediacy of Soul.

The parable shows that we should dismiss the time factor as an obstruction to realizing the presence of perfection, and instead "plunge beneath the material surface" (see S&H 313:24-26) to the underlying spiritual truth and rouse ourselves spiritually from lethargy, rejuvenating thought with the established facts of Principle and the presence of perfection here and now. According to sense-testimony there was no fruit on the fig tree, but the tree was not dead. It only needed stimulating into revealing what it had always had throughout the so-called period of time — namely, the ability to bear fruit.

No discouragement exists for the true athlete if he finds a lack of success or even near-defeat in his performance, for this awakens only a healthier conviction that the fruitage is already there and that he is going to experience it by cultivating with even greater vigour and love his response to the principle which holds the fruitage for him. An athlete and ourselves as students of Science are similar in that we must work to eliminate all that we see standing in the way of our realization and experience of the perfection which we know to be there and know to be us, since we *are* Principle's own expression of itself. Like the good athlete we should tackle this with true humour and confidence and above all become more and more conscious of God's love for us. The words of a hymn, "God is working His purpose out" are directly applicable to ourselves, and God's purpose for man has never failed.