

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

March 24, 2019  
The Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-9  
Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 63:1-8  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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Who watched Sesame Street growing up? If you did...who was your favorite character?

I have to admit...I really detested Big Bird. He was so annoying. I mean...he always asked too many questions and was a bit of a know-it-all or a goody-two-shoes depending on your perspective. I enjoyed Oscar the Grouch – he might have been grumpy but I thought he probably had a really good heart inside that trash can. Besides, I've always had a soft spot for curmudgiony fellows. But my true favorite was Cookie Monster.

He was exuberant and cheerful and full of energy. And, of course, there were the cookies. He was in my mind the most relatable of all the characters. Who wouldn't want to eat cookies all the time and not just eat them but cram them into your mouth with a wild abandon. Do you remember his favorite saying? ....*Me want cookies!* He even had a song that the boys and I used to know by heart...*C is for Cookie, It's good enough for me.*

Well, apparently, Cookie Monster's impatient eating habits weren't the best teaching tool for kids. A couple of years ago, Cookie had a change of heart. He went from demanding his cookies right then and there to practicing patience. Now he simply says, *Me want cookies...but me wait.*

In his book *Emotional Success*, David Destano breaks down this new perspective for Cookie Monster as an emphasis on our greater need for self-control which researchers once thought was the litmus test for success. Thus, the greater the self-control, the better off you will be in the long run. Seems reasonable.

Maybe you have heard of the marshmallow test. It was a simple test that tempted preschoolers with an option...have one marshmallow now or have two later (if you can wait). They found over the years that the preschoolers who were able to wait, to delay their gratification, were more successful, had better test scores, went to better colleges, had better social relationships and better health. They also were more astute with their finances.

But...was their delayed gratification and future success a result of their sheer will-power toward patience? Destano says, no. He argues that delayed gratification and the success that follows is actually the presence of three things...gratitude, compassion, and pride. Three emotions that he says have far more influence over our well-being and success than will power alone.

Why is that? He argues because these emotions are geared to not only an individual's success but also the success of a whole community. Of giving back and being attentive.

In other words, gratitude helps people give back to those who have helped them in the past. It changes what one values and how they respond out of that shift. It's an ebb and flow kind of relationship.

While, compassion motivates us to care for others even if we have not received help from them and we also do so without expecting a reward in return. Gratitude and compassion show our deeper desire for others to thrive.

And then there is pride. Pride, in this case, isn't so much a selfish reaction but an emotion that ties us to the good of the whole, the greater goal, the communal success and achievement. We enjoy being a part of something larger than ourselves.

With these emotions in play, we can be patient in regards to our own needs, putting off fulfillment for ourselves to insure that someone else has what they need.

So, I was intrigued when I came upon the parable of the fig tree in Luke. It seemed to have something to say about gratitude, compassion, and pride. At first glance, it holds a simple dichotomy...patience vs. impatience. The man in our parable wants figs right now. He feels he has waited long enough and because the tree isn't producing when he wants it to produce he gives up on the fruitless tree. In his haste and frustration, he simply wants to cut it down. To him, the tree was a waste and an annoyance keeping him from what he wanted and felt he deserved. He would rather opt for a quicker solution. Cut it down and move on to the next tree.

The gardener steps in and begs for more time...wanting to dig and cultivate and allow the tree to be fruitful – surely not just for this man but for whomever could benefit from the figs. You could say that the gardener, in his patience is grateful to even have a fig tree to cultivate... he wants to take time with it, to nurture it and help it along. He is compassionate. He doesn't want any harm to come to the tree because he feels it is worth the wait and he has hope that it will flourish if only given a little more time. And, the gardener takes pride in participating in the growth of this tree and he wants the man to know that by working together, by having faith in the process, that good will arise.

The delayed gratification that the gardener seeks has nothing to do with plain old self-control or will-power. It has everything to do with something much deeper and much more impactful. You get the sense from the story that his waiting has nothing to do with his own reward but everything to do with how the hoped for abundance will prove to be important to his community.

The larger lesson of the fig tree doesn't surprise me. Jesus rarely looks out for just one person...well, to be sure, he helps lots of individuals along the way but it is usually grounded in a larger communal lesson of grace and mercy.

Notice that our reading begins with a discussion of tragedy, of the Galileans who had suffered unspeakable acts of violence and destruction. People are pointing fingers, blaming, accusing.

Wondering, did those Galileans get what they deserved? Maybe they should have been cut down after all. The people in our story wanted quick and easy answers and they wanted to insure they weren't caught up in the issue at hand. Cut it down and move on.

But Jesus in essence tells them to stop and be patient. Stop looking for the quick fix and the easy answer. First, take some time and look at your priorities. Who are you trying to help? Before you go cutting down, maybe we can first do some cultivating of our own.

Here's the thing...what Luke is saying is that the ability to delay of our own individual gratification, is an important part of growing God's kingdom on earth. It isn't always easy. It takes hard work and patience. But with gratitude, compassion and pride of being a part of God's kingdom, we can work for peace, justice, mercy, wholeness and happiness...not just for ourselves but for all of God's children.

Amen.