

Selected Sermons #7

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

LUKE 13:6-9 New Year's Eve

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for the fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' "

Dearly beloved of God for Jesus' sake –

"Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky; the flying clouds, the frosty night. The year is dying all the night. Ring out, wild bells, and let it die." A poet heard the pealing bells of New Year's Eve, and that is what he thought. Yes, let it die, that old year that is now gone; let it die with its ugliness and sorrows and tears – but may we remember well that it does not die alone. When the world attends the funeral of an old year, we stand at its grave and toss in after it those things that are not wanted any more, things we wish to be rid of. With the old year let certain memories die; yes, and certain things that have proved useless are discarded at this convenient time. It is a season when the merchant

can clear his stock, noting the un-saleable items. When people speak of laying aside old habits and forming new ones, they want better resolutions.

But is that all? If the last hours of an old year are thought to be a time for the death of worthless things, what better season can there be for the Lord to walk abroad in his garden and clear out the rubbish? The year is dying in the night, and thoughtful people hear not only the pealing bells, but also the measured tread of the Almighty as he walks through his vineyard on this night to see what should be cut down. His voice becomes almost as urgent as it once sounded in the Garden of Eden when he was searching for Adam and Eve.

We seem to hear him say, *"Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?"* Is he speaking of you or of me? It is a bad night for worthless things; it is a bad night for those who have failed. We have come here not to watch the year die but to hear the words that give poor sinners their only hope of life –

"Sir, let it alone this year also."

We shall hear how these words sound

- I. In the ears of Almighty God tonight**
- II. As a prayer of our Savior**
- III. As a promise from us**

I. “*Sir, let it alone this year also.*” As a proposition laid before Almighty God in the hour of the birth of a new year, **how does it sound to him?** That will surely depend upon who or what *it* is that he should let alone for another year.

In the parable before us, *it* is a fig tree that the owner planted in his vineyard. A fig tree, mind you, not a grapevine – a tree planted where it did not actually belong, but was placed there by the owner for his own particular joy and delight. Year by year he watched its growth with great interest until the age of fruit-bearing had been reached. Then came the season when for the first time there should have been ripe figs. Then master came to pluck the figs, but there were none.

Another year passed, and yet another. Two or three times each year there should have been a harvest, but there never were any figs. Our parable shows the owner standing by the tree at the end of the third, fruitless year with empty hands. If you owned a vineyard of valuable grapes and had a fig-tree standing there, drawing goodness from the soil but never yielding acceptable fruit, what would you do?

Now, we know from the circumstances in which our Savior told this parable and what the tree represents, for our Lord at the time was speaking of Jerusalem. God’s

chosen nation of Israel was his vineyard, as the Scriptures so often say. And in the midst of Israel, the Lord has long ago planted this city; like a fig tree, it was a special pleasure for him. Some day, when bearing time came, he was going to harvest fruit sweet to his taste from this blessed city.

Then the bearing season came – when John the Baptist stood saying, “Repent, and be baptize, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!” All Jerusalem went out to hear him, as we know. Thereafter Jesus came in person, yet he found nowhere a city more unwilling to fall at his feet and offer him the fruit of repentance and faith. It was now three years since Jesus had begun the search for fruit in Jerusalem, but the city was still going along in its old ways. Here and there a few had turned from their ways, but you could count them on your fingers. The Word was made flesh, and Jerusalem saw his glory, but the city was only making ready to kill him.

“Sir, let it alone this year also.” God did that with Jerusalem, and in that next year it crucified his Son. Tonight, as the Almighty walks in his vineyard at the turn of the year, he comes and stands before it. And what is ***it?*** Could it be this congregation? A fig tree indeed, planted long ago in the midst of the vineyard of the Church of the Lord. For years it has stood in the soil of a synod which has ***brought forth the fruits*** of pure doctrine and of sound

practice. This congregation might also have been planted or grown from seed in some other place – in a synod where false doctrine is common, where sound, Scriptural churches practice is not maintained. But no, it was established for God’s delight in an ideal spot. It is supposed to have shown the **very finest of Christian fruit** – a high quality of Christian knowledge, love, striving for higher, better things, complete devotion to the gospel and the sacraments, satisfied only with the best where God is concerned. This is a serious night for such a congregation – for as the year ends, **it’s right to live another year is up for discussion.**

Or it can also be some person in this congregation - you or I. We are all like trees planted in a fertile soil. To justify your presence and my presence in a congregation like this, where the very streams of heaven come down to water and nourish our spiritual roots, where the precious blood of God’s Son is never sparingly used to heal and cleanse, we can excuse our being here only on the ground that **God planned to delight in our fruits.** We were to satisfy him with the beauty of a Christian life by showing how wonderful children of God really are.

“Sir, let it alone this year also.” How do these words sound as a year’s end proposal? **How do they sound in the ears of Almighty God** tonight as he stands before his fig trees? Will they appear to him as a

good suggestion? God heard it a year ago, too, as you will remember. Just a year ago tonight, the same appeal was made: *“Let it alone this year also...”* and he did. This congregation, you, me; he let us stand – and now it is the same request. Is it reasonable? Oh, the question is not whether we are good or bad but whether we are worth leaving to stand in his vineyard, to have all the care that has been lavished upon us to **make us fruitful!** The fig tree wasn’t really bad, either, but lovely in its way – full of dark, green leaves. A fine shade tree, but it stood in a vineyard where fruit was wanted.

Do you have the same thought I have – that God must feel he is being taken for a fool to be asked to let us alone another year? What if he came tonight with another thought – to say, *“Cut it down! Why does it use up the ground?”* Not only could we not deny his right to do so but we are moved to doubt whether we have the right to ask anything else. Are we not encumbering the rich ground in which we are planted? When we think of the spiritual wealth with which we have been endowed during the past year and measure the quality and quantity of fruit we have produced to the glory of God, **who of us dares to say, “Sir, let it alone this year also”?**

II. But those are not our words, and they are not our prayer! Unworthy as we are to make this appeal, **there is**

another who makes it for us, in whose mouth our hope lies tonight.

Going back to the parable, we find that the fig tree has a faithful friend. It is the gardener; yes, the very man who has had all the trouble and the work with that unfruitful tree, for he has nursed it along from its seedling days. What love and skill he has expended upon the ungrateful plant, without ever any thanks, despite repeated disappointments! Yet the tree has grown close to his heart. This gardener stands between the master and the tree and **asks for another year of grace**. He overrules a just demand to cut it down and promises to redouble his efforts to make it pay. Such a gardener we have at our side tonight – **it is our Savior** who gave himself for us. When no one else dares to plead for us, he speaks. He alone has the right to utter the word, *“Let it alone this year also,”* and with him alone do they have power to overrule the righteous wrath of God. We are unsatisfactory, but God cannot deny the sacrifice that his Son brought for us. Jesus claims us by virtue of his suffering and death. His willingness to spare us is great. How he has already dug around us – who will declare it? **Lo, he promises to try again!** Such never-failing mercy!

Yet another year he will give me to preach; yet another year for you and I to hear his message of hope. His hopes are always new; he never gives up until the sign

is plain that we are bound to have our own way and that we will not follow. Then, although he leaves the words unspoken, it is clear that even he shall act with justice and cut the tree down.

III. Shall we let his hope and his prayer be in vain? Nay, since he prays for us, **let us take his words and make them a promise.** Would to God that people stop making foolish promises tonight! This year also, they say, *one more year*, “then we shall have won the war; then we shall make peace; then we shall do great things.” Those are promises of pride. Those who think of nothing else tonight are sick with self-assurance; they have not even heard the voice of God in the vineyard!

“*Let it alone this year also*” should be **our promise of fruit**, and that promise is necessary. Often the Lord has let loose a great flood of mercy upon a people or individuals just before their final destruction – seeking by his very goodness to save them – but they mistook his grace for weakness and became even harder. So it was in the days of Noah, just before the Flood. So it was when Jesus came to Jerusalem; after him came the destruction of that city.

Tonight the voice of Jesus pleads, and the Father answers, “*Just another year.*” Therefore we go into a new year and taste there in ever richer measure the goodness

of God upon us. If we let that move us to lightly despise his goodness, the final destruction is certain. Even the gardener will say, *“Cut it down.”* So let it become a promise, **a promise of fruit, and that fruit is repentance.**

Not that we shall offer to bring forth the flower and blossom of a Christian life, for our Savior will do that, as he has always tried to do by his digging and nurturing. Our promise shall be to repent of our neglect and thanklessness and resistance against the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge our past, but the Lord has always managed to get us ahead of our past. Our Savior’s prayer, and ours too, is that the coming year will see green leaves, blossoms, and fruit in our hearts and lives – that his vineyard not become a graveyard!

God grant it to us, for Jesus’ sake! Amen!

Across the sky the shades of night #110

Our God, our help in ages past #123

The old year now hath passed away #125