Luke 13:6-9
When Grace Butts In
WRCoB 3.16.25

We would be in great error
If we interpreted this parable
As simply a story depicting a conversation
Between God and Jesus.

It's easy to cast God
As the owner of the vineyard demanding fruit

And Jesus as the compassionate gardener
Pleading on behalf of the tree . . ..

But the analogy isn't that simple.

This story isn't about a kind Jesus and a mean God.

Rather, it reveals two distinct qualities *within* God
Traits that are held in tension.

Qualities that express the very essence of God:

Justice and Grace.
~~
We would be mistaken if we simply connected
The owner of the vineyard *with* God
And the gardener *with* Jesus.

I did that very thing when I preached this passage years ago

But by doing so, I created a false divide
Within the very nature of God
As if God were somehow at odds with Himself.

That's not the way we should look at this parable
God is both; the owner and the gardener.

They represent two essential attributes of one God:

Jesus taught this parable to help us understand
The tension between justice and grace.
~~
Our lesson follows a rather harsh warning from Jesus.

It's found in verse 5

Luke 13:3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish!

He says repent or perish twice, v. 3 and v. 5

Make no mistake the parable is a sober warning.

But thank God, the parable is also about something else:

It is an object lesson on the love of God.

It reveals a God of second chances.

The owner of the vineyard.
Is angry at the lack of productivity of a fig tree.

The owner planted the fig tree
In his garden three years before
And it has yet bore fruit.

The owner wants it cut down.

But the gardener steps in on behalf of the fruitless tree.

He pleads with the owner for another chance.

He will give it special attention.
To see if by next year I'll bear fruit.

And if by this time next year, the tree has not produced
The owner can cut it down.
~~
We get the message loud and clear
We need a God of Justice AND Grace

But why, you might ask, should the gardener
Concern himself with a fig tree barren for three years?

Why should he step in
Putting himself between the wrath of the owner
And an infertile, unproductive fig tree?

Why should he care?
He cares because he loves the tree.
In fact, he loves his garden and every tree in it!

He has toiled there so that all the trees
Can produce to their fullest potential
And he doesn't easily give up!
~~
In a simple yet profound way
The parable contrasts the owner of the vineyard
As a wrathful and impatient God
With the gardener
The patient and loving Jesus Christ.

But in truth, they are one.

Theologically speaking, we understand
That God and Jesus are two parts of a Triune God.

The parable separates them to show a theological tension

The tension between
The God of justice and the God of grace
The God of righteousness and the God of mercy
The God of wrath and the God of love.

We do an injustice when we associate
A wrathful God with the OT
And a gracious God with the NT.

They are one in the same.
~~
The theme of justice and mercy
Runs through the Bible.

God is both just and merciful.

And to understand God in any other way
Distorts the truth of who God is.

For we need a God of justice
To guide us with a clear standard of right and wrong
And to ensure responsibility and accountability.

Without justice, society would extend into chaos
With no protection for the weak and vulnerable
And no consequences for wrong doing.

By the same token
We need God's mercy that leads to healing
Forgiveness, transformation and restoration.

Mercy offers an opportunity to be forgiven
To repent and correct the wrongs
And to rebuild one's life.

The kingdom that God creates and promotes
Offers the balance between justice and grace

God demands justice but offers grace.

This is the beauty and truth of our relationship
With God through Christ.

The title of my sermon is

When Grace Butts In

For within our parable
We find the owner preparing to mete out justice
By ridding himself of the fruitless fig tree.

But just as the axe is about to fall
The gardener steps in, not to thwart justice
But to *fulfill* it in another, more profound way

Give the tree another chance.
Let's see what it'll do.
~~
It's good to have a God who is just
Who upholds what is right.

But oh, my brothers and sisters
It is *infinitely* better to have a God who is merciful
Who sees our potential even through our failures.

A God who offers us a path to redemption
When we least deserve it.

For just at the right time
When we are at the end of our rope
When we have exhausted all our options

Just when we face the consequences of our own choices...
Grace butts in!

It reminds me of a passage in Ephesians
A passage that really speaks of God's grace.

It's an incomplete sentence
But it completes God's essence
Making its meaning more than clear.

Ephesians 2:4: 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love for us...'

'But God...'

Those two words, “but God”, change *everything*.

They remind us that even when we are dead
In our trespasses and sins

Even when we have turned away from God
Even when we face the judgment we deserve...

But God, in His boundless mercy
Reaches out to us with love
And offers us a new beginning.

Like the gardener who steps in on behalf of the fig tree

Grace butts into our lives
Offering us a chance to turn things around
A promise of transformation.

And just like the gardener
Who was committed
To digging around the roots and fertilizing the soil

God doesn't just offer us a second chance
God actively works to nurture us, to help us grow
To transform us into the people He created us to be.

~~

Philip Yancy writes:

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more

There is nothing we can do to make God love us less

For really, if you think about it
The whole of the Bible is a story of Grace butting in!

Grace interrupted the people of Nineveh
Turning them from their wayward ways
And bringing about repentance
Through the most unlikely of messengers, Jonah.

Grace interrupted King David, piercing his soul
Making him keenly aware of his hidden sins
Through the words of the prophet Nathan.

Grace butted in on the road to Damascus
Bringing the enthusiastic persecutor Saul to his knees
And transforming him into the Apostle Paul.

Grace butted in with love for the world
So big, so expansive
By sending his one and only Son, Jesus.

And Grace butted in
In a way that defied all human understanding

When they took Jesus
The very embodiment of innocence and love
The very essence of grace

And nailed him to the cross.
Yet, as the book of Acts proclaims:

Acts 2:24 CEB
[24] God raised him up! God freed him from death's dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him.

And Grace *is* going to interrupt human history one day
Ushering in the fullness of God's kingdom
A kingdom of justice, peace, and everlasting love.

And now won't *that* be something?

Grace has certainly butted into my own life
At just the right times when I needed to know
The depth and breadth of God's unwavering love

It's divine interruptions that define the very story of God
The very core of the Gospel.

So, I ask you
How have *you* been interrupted by God's grace?

How has it made a difference in *your* life?

Without it, where would *you* be today?

When Grace butts in... *everything* changes.

When the Holy Judge is poised
To mete out the justice that we deserve
Grace butts in and pleads for a second chance
A new beginning, a life transformed by love.

And that, my brothers and sisters
Is the Good News we celebrate today.

A Good News that reminds us
That God is not just a distant judge
But also, a compassionate gardener

Tending to the soil of our lives
Nurturing our growth
And offering us a second chance.

For it is in this life-giving tension
Between God's justice and God's grace
That we truly encounter God’s salvation.