

AFGO

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Ever heard of the acronym AFGO? A F G O?

I learned about it when I did some pastoral training at Maine Medical Center. I like AFGO because it has a swear word in it—and I can relate. AFGO means, “Another *Bleeping* Growing Opportunity.”

AFGOs are those annoying or difficult moments in your life when you can turn away or you can face the crap and deal with it. The AFGO part comes in when you know you need to face the crap.

AFGOs are often hard work, as anybody here who has ever gardened or excavated their soul knows. You gotta get down and dirty, break a sweat, have patience, sit with uncertainty. But the truth is that it’s typically fruitful work.

I think an AFGO is the point of this morning’s lesson.

But let’s first look at what was going on back in the day this text written. Luke was addressing a community of believers who already had some knowledge of Christianity, but they needed their faith deepened, needed more precise teachings. And part of fine tuning these believers includes driving home the ideas of sin and repentance—Luke is rather passionate about those ideas, using the word *repent* twenty-five times—far more than the other Gospels.

As an aside, the Common English Bible translation of the Holy Bible has a much more palatable phrasing of sin and repentance, framing these things as changed hearts and lives.

Also, Luke is enamored with Israel and Isaiah’s prophecy, so relies he heavily on the Book of Isaiah and the movement of God’s people, the Israelites.

Our lesson opens up with a reference to Pilate’s slaughter of some Galileans in the temple. Murderous and sacrificial blood are mixed. In wanting to make sense of the brutality, believers wonder what those Galileans’ sin must have been to meet such an end.

See, that’s what we do here on earth. Our default mode is often to equate bad things happening to us with personal blame. And while sometimes that might be true, it doesn’t explain most bad things that happen to most people. So Jesus replies, in verse 2, as if saying, “Gimme a break! Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans?”

In the next verse, Jesus answers his own question: “No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.”

I don't think Jesus meant that they'd die a brutal death if they don't change their hearts and lives. It's much more straight up than that. Jesus meant they'd die not knowing what it was like to live fully, to live with a changed heart and life.

So while Jesus denies that the Galileans suffered a brutal death because they lacked changed hearts and lives, one thing is certain—the death part is a given. What's not certain is the fate of his followers, which also includes you and me. The fate remains to be seen.

So Jesus shows them the way with this story about the barren fig tree, which I have come to understand as an AFGO.

In first-century Palestine, a vineyard is a common metaphor for the people of Israel, and the fruit to be expected from the Israelites is Godly living—hence all the rules in the Book of Leviticus so that people knew what “Godly living” meant. And again, Luke is deeply connected to his Israeli roots, and so is heavily focused on the ideas of sin and repentance—or the ideas of changed hearts and lives. Jesus' listeners would understand this connection as Jesus tells the parable.

The owner of the fig tree is ready to cut it down! It's been three years, and the tree has had plenty of time to demonstrate its fruitfulness and has apparently failed. The owner feels he's waited long enough, needs the land freed up for something that's going to be productive. So, with axe in hand, he is ready to end things.

Again, the early followers would understand the story, since Israel's history provides many instances where God used an axe to prune their sins.

But then in verses 8 and 9, the gardener intervenes: Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! He says to the land owner, who is also his boss, “Lord, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it, and fertilize it. If it bears fruit, fine; but if not, after that, all yours! You can cut it down.”

In other words, give it a chance. You've already put three years into it. Heck, what's one more year? The payoff might be magnificent! Come on, give the barren tree another bleeping growing opportunity—give the tree an AFGO!

What we don't know is whether in the previous three years, the tree received any manure, and that detail is what makes this a juicy story to me. As we keep walking through Lent with the theme of working with our shadows, what if another way to look at our shadows was by considering the crap in our lives? The stinky, messy, keep-it-stuffed-way-back-and-hard-to-find-in-the-dark-and-dingy-shed part of our lives?

What if we engaged the stinky part of our lives, instead of stuffing those things away? Or spraying perfume on them? Or misshaping and misrepresenting them by sanitizing them?

What if we agree to trust the gardener—aka, the Divine—to help us work with the ick and work it and till it back into our souls?

In the story, the gardener—if the landowner agrees to leave the tree another year—is pretty dedicated. He is not gonna leave the tree's opportunity to have a transformative heart and mind to chance.

The soil will be worked, the water will reach the roots, and most of all the icky and stinky manure will fortify that tree with a vexing and life-giving force that's enough to easily encourage the production of some mighty fine fruit.

No need to go around barren, empty of life.

You know, soil and the elements are mighty and mysterious things. So is the way God goes in deep to work with our souls.

My prayer on this third Sunday of Lent is that you drag your manure, your stinky parts, out of the dark shed and over to the roots of your psyche, your soul, and you let God do what God does.

Beloveds, the story ends without telling us whether or not the owner accepts the gardener's offer for an AFGO. As Lent continues to unfold, will you?

Amen.