

Tender

Luke 13:6-9

February 28, 2016



It is a tender embrace ...

Jesus' left hand gently cradles the back of Peter's head, comforting him, drawing him close. His right hand reaches for Peter's waist, ready to steady him, ready to support him, reaching out to touch him.

It is an intimate embrace ...

The colors of the two figures are mottled and muted, not sharp and distinct. The differences between them and between them and the background of the painting are blurred. You must look closely, very closely, to see where the face of one ends and the other begins.

Is this the portrait of two figures or of one? The artist, Kathy Priddis, took inspiration for this painting from the ancient yew trees of her native Herefordshire in England, their multiple exposed roots intertwined to form a single impressive tree. Two figures, two men, drawn into an intimate embrace that blurs the distinction between them.

What do you think?

It's not the way I am accustomed to think of Jesus. When I think of the Jesus I have seen portrayed in art or film or when I think of the Jesus I picture in my own imagination, he is almost always standing. Standing on a hillside or in a boat or beside a young girl's bed. Walking beside a lake, walking down a village street, standing in the synagogue to read.

He is standing apart or above or over against, maybe sometimes standing beside, or maybe sometimes sitting to eat, or maybe sometimes kneeling, but kneeling alone to pray, or kneeling, yes, to wash his disciples' feet, but then standing again, in front of them, apart from them, to instruct them.

But I have never pictured Jesus like this, never touching and holding and embracing like this, never this close, never this kind of intimacy.

Why not? Why have I, why have we, never imagined Jesus like this?

I think we are afraid of intimacy, intimacy in general. It is ironic that in a culture so obsessed with sex, not too reluctant to bare our bodies, we dare not bare our souls. We are fiercely protective of what is inside, afraid of being “found out,” afraid of getting too close. We don’t want to be seen as needy or weak, we don’t want to expose our innermost feelings to judgment or ridicule, so we keep our selves, our truest selves, at a safe distance.

I think we are afraid of intimacy, intimacy with Jesus in particular. What would it mean to let Jesus in, to let Jesus all the way in? I would lose control. I might lose myself. I would be overwhelmed, consumed, limp and powerless. And what I am and what I want would no longer be separable from what he is and what he wants.

It is frightening to be that close to Jesus ... but is it a bad thing?

It is a tender embrace ...

It is the embrace of a tender, of one who tends, who cares, who cares for, like the gardener, like the gardener in Jesus’ parable who is not ready to give up on the barren fig tree.

Just one more year! I will dig around it and put in some fertilizer [and then,] then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better.

Commentators emphasize the sense of urgency in Jesus’ parable and liken it to his announcement of the imminent coming of God’s kingdom: “The right time has come and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!”

In other words, you have time, but not much time. This is your final chance. The window of opportunity to be saved is fast closing. And if the fig tree fails to bear fruit -- if you fail to bear fruit -- it will be cut down.

Maybe so. Maybe they are right. But what if? What if the gardener digs around the base of the fig tree and feeds fertilizer to its roots and next year comes and there are no figs? What will the gardener, the tender, say? “Cut it down?” Or “Just one more year!”

I don’t think the gardener, the tender, can bear the thought of giving up on this fig tree. After all, he says to the owner of the vineyard: “If the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down.” You cut it down! Because he, the gardener, the tender, could not bear it.

Do you know any barren fig trees? A son, a daughter, a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor who seems to be a lost cause, who has been tended and cared for and invested in and prayed for to no avail? Is it time to cut it down? Is it time to give her up?

Or maybe the lost cause, the barren tree, is you. Are you ready to give up ... on yourself? Your gardener, your tender, will never give up! Jesus will never give up! Just one more year!

It is a tender embrace ...

Jesus' left hand gently cradles the back of Peter's head, comforting him, drawing him close. His right hand reaches for Peter's waist, ready to steady him, ready to support him, reaching out to touch him.

And Peter? Leaning in. Reaching out. Letting go. Letting go ... ready to let himself be held, ready to let himself be consumed, ready to let himself be joined to Jesus. And the two will become one ...