

Laurie Sedgwick:

Good morning, and welcome to Morning Prayers. Please stand as you are able for our responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter book. This morning we'll be reading Psalms 105, found on page 53.

Laurie Sedgwick:

We give you thanks, oh God, and call upon your name. We make known your deeds among the peoples.

Congregation:

We sing to you. We sing your praise and speak of all your marvelous works.

Laurie Sedgwick:

We glory in your holy name. Let the hearts of those who seek you rejoice.

Congregation:

We search for you and your strength. We continue to seek your place.

Laurie Sedgwick:

You spread out a cloud for a covering, and a fire to give light in the night season.

Congregation:

You opened the rock and the water flowed. [crosstalk 00:03:44] in the dry places.

Laurie Sedgwick:

For you remembered your holy word, and Abraham your servant.

Congregation:

[crosstalk 00:03:56] your chosen which shouts for joy.

Laurie Sedgwick:

You gave your people the lands of the nations, and they took the fruit of others' toil.

Congregation:

That they might keep your statutes and reserve your laws. Hallelujah.

Choir:

(singing)

Jenny Hoffman:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Jenny Hoffman:

A reading from Luke 13:6-9, "Then Jesus told this parable, a man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and when 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 have been coming to look for 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.'"

So which character do you identify with in this parable? For many years here at Harvard, more than three I confess, I was the fig tree. I joined the faculty in 2005, hopelessly immature and under-prepared. A PhD in physics taught me how to solve equations, design equipment, and write code. It did not teach me how to seek funding, recruit students, negotiate with journal editors, teach a 200 person class, or navigate different department politics. I made some ridiculous mistakes.

It never occurred to me to negotiate my salary or my teaching load. I was initially tasked with solo teaching Harvard's large Pre-Med Physics class in the first year that medical schools required a laboratory component. So, through 40+ hours per week into creating a mechanics lab that asked students to build a Rube Goldberg machine, combining springs, pendulum, levers, rolling, bouncing and falling objects to launch a paper airplane. The students were exceptionally creative in their inventions, but also in their elaborate criticism in the teaching evaluations.

I was often overwhelmed by emails with subject lines suggesting conflicting opinions or imminent deadlines. I simply pretended they didn't exist. I declared email bankruptcy more than once. Then there are the truly absurd errors, including wardrobe malfunctions, the time I got stuck in my office and had to yell for help because the doorknob fell off, the mortifying event when I knocked over a glass of red wine into the lap of the Nobel Laureate sitting next to me, or the incident when my toddler pooped in my senior colleague's swimming pool during a faculty party.

In some, I was woefully under-prepared. I usually didn't know what questions I was supposed to be asking, and even when I did, I had trouble finding anybody willing to give me answers. The saying in academia is "Publish or perish," and if publications are figs, then I was a barren fig tree for many long years. Colleagues told me that I should be cut out of their physics vineyard. I am forever grateful that a few gardeners made a last minute plea that I might be worth waiting for, and thanks to their patience I am privileged to remain bearing good fruit in this Harvard vineyard today.

I also identify as the inpatient vineyard owner. I now manage a lab of more than 30 people, and I am responsible for spending millions of taxpayer dollars to discover useful quantum materials. A wise manager must know when to cut their losses and move on to more productive ventures. I sometimes must terminate unproductive employees, or cut down the overly optimistic dreams of good students. But mostly today, I identify as the gardener, overwhelmed by the number of fig trees to be nurtured and fertilized.

Everywhere, there are students full of incredible potential who just need a little more time, constructive feedback, attention, and validation to bear glorious fruit. Students who are declaring email bankruptcy

and thus missing crucial funding or learning opportunities. Students who lack the confidence to ask a question or the organization to attend office hours, but their course may be changed by personal conversation and friendly invitation at an opportune moment.

Students who request just a one week extension, which will nonetheless mess up the entire grading system of the class. Students who need somebody to listen to them and believe in them over, and over, and over again for many years until they believe in themselves. I can see fig trees in adjacent vineyards too, a track team in need of an advocate to help them balance athletic and academic commitments. A graduate program in need of a writing tutor. A local middle school in need of a math coach to stimulate bored kids with fun puzzles and games.

Other fig trees, like I once was, young faculty who need better information about funding, teaching expectations, and challenging student conversations or professional self-advocacy. As I look outward, I see rows of fig trees that require more than individual nourishment, but a new irrigation system for the whole vineyard. A new education system. A new justice system. Can one devoted gardener organize and achieve these changes? Should she try, even if it means neglecting the individual fig trees right in front of her?

I hear fig trees in distant vineyards, refugees of violence, political oppression, climate disasters. How can one gardener figure out how to effectively support these distant vineyards? How can one gardener avoid paralysis when so many fig trees need tending near and far? What should the gardener tell the owner who wants to cut? Wait one more year? Why not five more? Or why not cut immediately to make room for another promising young fig tree?

We face these painful questions every day. How can we reconcile our own challenges as barren fig trees, and our own ambitions as vineyard owners with our God-given talents and privileges that allow us to be gardeners and make awesome choices about which fig trees to prioritize with our meager 168 hours per week, our one wild and precious life? Recall, Jesus's parable does not encompass every vineyard. It is just one fig tree.

So today, do not be paralyzed. Find one fig tree near or far and nourish it. Tomorrow, do the same. Will you pray with me? God, show me a fig tree to fertilize today, that it may eventually bear fruit and nourishment for the fig trees of years to come. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Please stand as you are able, and let us recite together the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying "Our father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Forever and ever. Amen."

Laurie Sedgwick:

Let us sing the hymn, "Thou Whose Almighty Word", number 273 found in your crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Choir/Congregation:

(singing)

Laurie Sedgwick:

Lord, help us to live this day quietly, easily, to lean on your greatest strength trustfully, respectfully, to wait for the unfolding of your will patiently, serenely, to meet others in peace and joy, to face tomorrow with confidence and courage. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.