

Message: “Change Your Hearts and Lives”

How many addict farmers do you know? It’s an odd question, right? But it’s the best way to describe Daron Babcock. He lives on a farm in the middle of Dallas, Texas.

Daron says, “If that doesn’t surprise you, maybe this will: I knew nothing about farming when I moved to this neighborhood. I didn’t know much about life. I was a recovering cocaine addict who came close to destroying myself and my family and yet still struggled to contain a mighty ego.

Now I’m a farmer. I live in a house once owned by Habitat for Humanity and oversee Bonton Farms, a non-profit enterprise that grows organic produce, runs a market and a café, and employs people from the neighborhood who are a lot like I used to be - looking for a connection to grace and love that will enable them to become all God intended them to be.”¹

Bonton is one of the most challenging neighborhoods in the city. Almost a third of the residents live below the poverty line. Many have been incarcerated. This is not a typical farm community.

Why would someone who knows nothing about farming start a farm in the middle of a big city after recovering from substance abuse? Doesn’t it sound crazy?

It’s a God story, pure and simple. As Daron says, “I can’t take credit for this oasis of fertile soil and spiritual renewal. The truth is more wonderful. I’m living proof God can take the driest, deadest husk and transform it into a source of life and love that never stops giving.”²

Two decades ago, Daron and his wife Marcy lived in Portland, Oregon with their two young children. He ran a chain of restaurants. Marcy was his college sweetheart. They had fallen head over heels in love when they were young. But their family fell apart when Marcy was diagnosed with cancer. She died after two grueling years.

¹ <https://guideposts.org/positive-living/health-and-wellness/addiction-and-recovery/god-guided-this-recovering-addict-to-plant-a-community-farm/>

² *ibid*

Daron grew up going to church but never took faith seriously. He was more interested in his own ambition. So, when Marcy died, Daron had nothing to fall back on spiritually. He'd poured everything into this vision of a perfect family on the road to success. He depended on Marcy for his day-to-day emotional well-being. Her death left a hole he didn't know how to fill.

Daron was profoundly depressed. He left their business unattended. Daron went through the motions with the kids but mostly he withdrew and shut down. Going out and getting into fights became a regular source of release. He'd leave the kids with a sitter and carouse late into the night. That's how he got addicted to drugs.

Fortunately, a group of friends and family staged an intervention. Daron checked into a residential treatment program, where he was soon put on a suicide watch, full of rage and refusing to eat. Thankfully, when Daron came out of the program, he was on a different path.

What happened? Part of the program involved seeing a spiritual counselor. The counselor asked Daron what he believed and why. Daron didn't believe much of anything.

Then she asked, "What would it take for you to believe in God?" Daron couldn't put the question out of his mind. He couldn't help noticing other men in the program, all from different backgrounds. Somehow, they seemed more whole.

What did they have that he didn't? They'd surrendered to a higher power and were following the program while he held back. Daron realized he was too consumed by shame, too convinced he was permanently broken to turn to God or stop using drugs.

Daron shares what happened next. "One night, I couldn't stand it anymore. I got down on my knees and cried out, 'God, I don't know if you're real, but if you are, and you'll have me, I'm yours. I quit!'"³ It was a semi-incoherent prayer. The moment he said it an indescribable peace and joy came over him. Life and hope flooded into the hole of despair that had appeared after Marcy died. For the first time in two years, Daron felt like he had a reason to live.

³ *Ibid*

Once he left rehab, Daron sold what remained of his business, sold the house and moved to live closer to family. He got a job, found a church and went to 12-step meetings.

Daron also met Johnson Ellis, a long-time Christian who became a spiritual mentor. Ellis was the one who invited him to come and work in the community one day. Daron discovered he had a lot in common with the people there. They'd made a lot of mistakes. They were at a crossroads in their life. They were asking God which way to go.

They also had a Saturday morning Bible study. It became the highlight of Daron's week. But he began to get an uncomfortable feeling every time he prayed. "If you like the community so much, why are you there only one day a week?" God seemed to ask.

And God's questions grew more insistent. "Shouldn't you be sharing your life with that community? I could use someone like you to help create some opportunities. Do you want to work for a company for the rest of your life? Or do you want to join me in doing something new?"

For the first time in Daron's life, scripture began to come to life.

In Mark, Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Isaiah says true fasting is not just abstaining from food but sharing with the hungry, welcoming the poor into your home, and clothing those with nothing to wear. In Matthew, Jesus gives his followers a mission: make disciples who make disciples.

I won't go into further details, but Daron said, "Yes."

And God began to open doors. But it wasn't easy.

Right away, God spoke to, and through, Daron, saying, "We should start a garden." Everyone thought he was crazy, particularly since Daron had never gardened even one day. But they started in one yard. Neighbors came by and offered advice. They listened. Some of the street people who used to be mean turned out to have experience and got involved. They then found a farmer's market where they could sell produce and it began to grow. Things progressed so well they began to build some affordable housing and a wellness center.

Daron says, “I’d love to say I had some master plan shepherding Bonton Farms from its small start to what it is today, a non-profit with a \$4 million budget, more than 60 employees, 10,000 annual volunteers and a mission to disrupt the systems of inequity that created this place and its many challenges. We do so by feeding bodies, minds and hearts, and by restoring lives through discipleship, in a neighborhood usually ignored and cast aside.

But it’s a God story. And the story is still being told. God isn’t done with me, or Bonton Farms. God is always transforming and renewing. Always bringing new life out of hard soil.

One soul, one neighborhood at a time.”⁴

What a moving story of transformation and change by faith.

I think Daron’s story is an inspiring illustration of Jesus’ teaching. The narratives resonate in so many ways. There’s tragedy, gardening, and how we live as persons within a community. There are opportunities in our community to serve in the same way. We’re all called. Some lead, some are mentors, some workers and some volunteers. Both make us think about our faith, lives, household and who we reach out to in our community and how we do so. What kind of fruit do we bear?

Also, the narratives aren’t easy. Through them we encounter two aspects of God: God as sovereign Lord, the One who is judge. And we encounter the God of grace, the One who is merciful. Depending on how you were raised, your life experiences and more, we quickly discover the people around us may have very different views of God’s nature. Some people lean more toward the God of justice and truth. Some people lean more toward a God of mercy and love.

We often argue about these views without realizing God is a being of justice and mercy, love and truth. God’s nature isn’t in conflict. There’s a greater connection which unites us all: we are God’s children, made to worship and love God and all of creation. Life is hard enough without fighting over our positions.

⁴ *Ibid*

Jesus draws us to a deeper question. If there is tragedy in someone's life, who is to blame or whose fault is it? Did someone sin? And if there are no tragedies in someone's life, do they still need to repent?

Tragedy, says Jesus, isn't the measure of one's sinfulness or one's need to repent. There are tragedies with human causes and there are tragedies with natural causes. The bottom-line is this: those who aren't experiencing tragedies are also in need of repentance. We all need God.

Jesus then tells a parable about a fig tree that bore no fruit after three years. Since a fig tree supposedly reaches maturity after three years, most likely it would never bear fruit. The owner wants to cut it down and replace it, but the gardener asks for more time to see if it will bear fruit. The absence of judgment here and now can't be taken as a sign of one's righteousness. The absence of judgment is a sign of God's mercy, not God's approval.

Tragedy is no sure sign of sinfulness, just as the absence of tragedy is no sure sign of righteousness. All of us – those whose lives are tragic and those whose lives are tranquil – do wrong and we know it. All of us need to turn to God to be set free from what limits and binds us. Only when we're connected to God and to those who love us can our souls be healed and nourished. Only then can we change and grow. We discover new life, and, in time, spiritual fruit in our lives. We find ourselves becoming more patient, kind, assured, self-controlled, loving and joyful. We find ourselves caring for our neighbors, without seeking approval.

What will happen? The parable is open-ended. The fig tree represents our community, the people who claim to worship God. God calls us to be part of a community of faith, trusting God. We all have a role to play during the seasons of our life. Something amazing happens when we are faithful, loving and caring. People are drawn to us, wanting to know more about the love we share and the God we worship. This is fruit.

Salvation isn't about dying. It's about living. Jesus' parable asks us how we intend to live. Do we want our lives to mean something or simply be a statistic? This makes all the energy we spend casting blame or picking fights seem kind of pointless.

We worship a God of second chances or, as many chances it takes.

Thank you, God, for your grace and mercy. Help us to follow you and live as you show us, reaching out to the broken and lost, and inviting them to join us on the most important journey of life.

“Who are we living for?”

Let us pray ...

Luke 13:1-9 (CEB)

Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. He replied, “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.”

Jesus told this parable: “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’ The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’”