

# “One More?”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 7, 2010*

Third Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13:1-9

Fig trees don't fare so well in the Gospels. One morning during Holy Week, as Jesus is walking with his disciples toward the Temple to teach, he passes a fig tree. He is hungry and, because it is not the right season, there are no figs on the tree. Filled with anger, it appears, Jesus curses this tree which almost immediately withers. If it is not bearing fruit, what good is this tree's life?

We interpret this seemingly uncharacteristic demonstration by Jesus as judgment for those who fail to repent. Maybe we could have predicted it if we remembered John the Baptist's warning at the beginning of the Gospels. When people came to the Jordan River to be baptized, John called them to repentance with harsh and unrelenting words:

"Even now," John said, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Jesus wants us to live: he says to his disciples that he came so that we might have life. But, his passion is marked for us by great urgency: to look at our lives and dare to ask the hard questions: Am I stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Do I refuse to believe that I can be forgiven, carrying from year to year a growing burden of guilt? Am I so busy making a living that I've forgotten to make a life? "What have you done?" Jesus asks, and "What have you left undone?" Such questions, like this morning's, lesser acclaimed parable of the fig tree, move us toward repentance; a word that means to turn around, to believe things can be different, and to trust that the one who calls us to turn around will be there even when we fail.<sup>1</sup>

In this section of Luke's gospel, Jesus has been teaching the people about what it means to be a fruitful follower. He mentions things like giving

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Lundblat, "Could This Be the Year for Figs?"

alms to the poor, being ready to receive God, respecting others and resisting temptation. It would be natural for his listeners to start wondering whether they were fruitful enough to find favor in the eyes of God; and conversely to wonder whether those who meet misfortune do so because they have somehow failed to measure up.

It was common Jewish theology to believe that obedience to the Law brought blessings, but disobedience brought a curse. Here Jesus clearly rejects that view. A person's righteousness or lack of it has nothing to do with any evil that may befall that person.<sup>2</sup>

The ancient incidents mentioned in Luke certainly have modern equivalents. Like Pilate, there are leaders who commit horrific, violent acts in our day as well. Was God somehow angry with the people who died in the Twin Towers on 9-11, or with those in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, or in Haiti and Chile after the earthquakes? Did God select these individuals or communities to suffer because of something they had or had not done?

There have been voices – coming from the fringe, most of us believe – that the fall of the Twin Towers, the destruction of New Orleans, or natural devastation in Haiti and South America were examples of God taking revenge against some unrepentant sinner: capitalists, Americans, homosexuals or rebels. Jesus' questioners want him to explain these kinds of deaths as God's judgment against those whose fruit had gone bad. But, Jesus refuses to take the bait. Instead, he turns the question back upon the questioners; telling them that unless they repent, they will perish. God's judgment is not selective and does not operate on a sliding scale. "Rather than commenting on the sins of others, Jesus directs the attention of those who come to him back on their own lives of sin."<sup>3</sup> All fall short of the glory of God, Jesus reminds them, and everyone has need for God's mercy.

Jesus offers a parable – about the fig tree – to clarify his point about the necessity for repentance. As with other parables, it tells as much about God as it does about the world. In the parable, we can identify the characters: God is the landowner, Jesus is the gardener, and humans are the fig trees. Even the three years is equal to the time of Jesus' ministry on earth.

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie Hoppe in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

<sup>3</sup> Roberta Rhodes in *Lectionary Homiletics*, March, 2004

But, this one particular fig tree has not been bearing fruit. If the landowner is concerned about productivity, then the suggestion to cut down this tree is not surprising. Still, the gardener advises patience: give it one more year, he says, and see if fertilizing and tilling the soil might lead to a different result. This is the mercy of Christ, who will intercede on behalf of even those who deserve it the least. Note that the gardener asks not to work on the tree itself, but on the soil in which the tree grows.<sup>4</sup> Christ does not just work on us, but also around us. Our most basic affirmation of faith is that God is present and active in the world as the living Christ and through the movement of the Holy Spirit.

As Christians – those who seek to imitate the character of Christ – how do we fit into this parable of the fig tree? Having been redeemed by the mercy of Christ, we are not simply trees in the ground, taking up space and waiting to be chopped down at the time of God’s choosing. Instead, we are called to be fellow workers with Christ – even more so in the physical absence of Christ – seeking to cultivate fruitfulness within those people and places which appear sickly and dying. Followers of Jesus are called to be practitioners of the forgiveness they have experienced: to give second and third chances; offering mercy not seven times but seventy times seven. This may not create fruitfulness in others – that remains in the realm of God’s activity – but it requires faithfulness to our calling: loving others and judging not, lest we be judged.

So, what is the faithfulness to which we are called? Usually, we define it in terms of beliefs. We think that by having the right beliefs, we are fulfilling Christ’s command to be faithful; we sometimes call ourselves “defenders of the faith.” But, Jesus meant far more than adherence to beliefs when he used the term. He defined faithfulness in terms of behavior: as a willingness to take risks (like believing that faith can move mountains) to give fruitfulness another chance in the next growing season.<sup>5</sup>

Each of us – based on our tradition and experience – has a different understanding of God. I believe this is one reason why there exists such a variety of churches and denominations within the family tree of Christianity. And yet, with all the differences, each of us lives with the tension of a God characterized by both judgment and mercy. Everyone is a sinner – Jesus never shied from affirming this basic reality – and all of us need to seek

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<sup>4</sup> Wes Avram in *Lectionary Homiletics*, March, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Brian Stoffregan from *Textweek.com*

God's forgiveness for our sins and sinful ways. And yet, we also believe that God offers second chances: not with reluctance or prejudice as humans do, but in harmony with the gracious offering of Jesus our Savior.

In Christ, the tension between judgment and grace is not so much resolved as it is taken out of our hands. As Jesus calls us toward repentance, he reminds us that life and death will never be fully understood. Instead, our fruitfulness depends wholly on the mercy of Christ, and upon our faithfulness as servants for the Lord.

We proclaim a God of second and third chances and beyond. As we seek to imitate our Lord, Jesus, should we not also be extending the hand of mercy and grace to others; even those who seem sinful and sickly and simply taking up space? They, like us, can also repent – turn around and return to God. “One more year,” we hear the gardener say, let's give it another chance. AMEN.

*Jesus said: ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For God abounds in love and mercy and welcomes our return; for in Christ, God came to us so that we might have life and life in abundance.*