

Luke 13:1-9  
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell  
July 17, 2024

## Catastrophes and Fig Trees

When I read a passage like this I often wonder if you are thinking “What in the world is Fred going to do with this one?”

Today we have a parable about a Fig Tree not living up to expectations by not bearing fruit. But preceding it is the story of two catastrophes. I think they are related.

Jesus references events from the Jerusalem Times. First Headline: Temple-Gate! Here’s the backstory. Pilate, the corrupt and brutal governor of Judea, wanted to fund a public works project in Jerusalem using temple funds — misappropriating money for political gain. Good thing politicians don’t do that anymore.

Galilean pilgrims protested Pilate's misuse of Temple funds. Pilate sent guards to quell the unrest, resulting in violence and people being slaughtered inside the temple, hence "their blood was mingled with the sacrifices."

Some people thought the Galileans got what they deserved! “Their murder is God’s justice for them endangering all of us by stirring up the hornet’s nest of Pilate’s wrath. These people had this coming to them!”

As soon as these folks bring up this story, Jesus responds “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”

And Jesus answers his own question. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Zinger! But Jesus isn’t done.

Headline #2: Tower Collapses, Killing 18. It is quite possible that the 18 who died in the Tower of Siloam were working on that very building project. Some would see those people as complicit in Pilate’s oppression. I’d imagine they took heat from some for being part of the building project.

Part of the emotional toll oppressed people endure is having to make these kinds of decisions to survive.

When they died in this catastrophe, some were no doubt provoked to say, "That was God's justice." They got what they deserved.

So, Jesus asks a similar question: "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

And answers it again: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Key phrases: "as they did" or "in the same way." Jesus isn't talking about the afterlife or hell. Instead, he's warning that those who refuse to abandon the path of national rebellion against Rome will suffer the consequences. "Those who take the sword will perish with the sword." They must rethink war and peace according to God's kingdom, or they will die by Roman swords and collapsing buildings, which is exactly what happened a generation later.

Jesus' primary concern in the text isn't to unravel the mystery of God but to tell them to reevaluate their "stinking thinking" driven by their own internal anxieties. We want to believe good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, but sometimes bad things happen to good people. Sometimes the worst things happen to the very best people! Like Jesus for instance.

Before I talk about the fig tree parable, have you turned this kind of thinking on yourself? Do you blame yourself for the crisis areas of your life? That the painful catastrophes of your life could have been avoided if we had just been a better person?

It's so easy to be captive to the illusion that we are in some way responsible for things that are otherwise outside of our control. This, too, is "stinking thinking" that is really bad news for us and for our neighbors.

Then Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree in a vineyard that is unproductive.

Christians tend to read the impatient landowner as God, and Jesus assuaging God's wrath against Israel with a plea for divine patience.

But that's ridiculous. No Jew hearing Jesus' parable could have thought that the landowner was God. Because God won't break God's own law about trees and fruit, which forbids eating the fruit of newly planted trees during their first three years of life.

The vineyard owner sounds more like me than the God revealed in Jesus. Angry, impatient, wanting better results. I'm the one who judges myself and others. Why do I think a tree, a person, has no worth unless they produce?

The landowner isn't an angry God. The landowner is Caesar, Herod, Pilate and all the murderous leaders of the empire who destroy people and trees — the breakers of the Law, profiteers at the expense of God's creation, effectively the rapists of the land of milk and honey.

Jesus envisions the land as holy and in need of nurturing, caring for, and ensuring the flourishing of all creation. This contrasts with the vision of empire, which violently takes, impatiently destroys, and demands immediate results.

To apply this parable, what if we look for ourselves in each of the players? Parables invite that kind of playfulness with the text.

Remember, the poorest and most vulnerable are the worst hit by both natural and man-made disasters. Whether it's a tornado, climate change, a hurricane, or war-mongering tyrants, they pay the price. Perhaps our call to bear fruit is the fruit to serve and protect these communities, acknowledging that catastrophes disproportionately impact them. To use our resources to provide intentional care that will provide life.

What would it mean for us to lean more into taking on the role of Jesus the gardener, to invest in, cultivate, and nurture those around us who are so wounded by the world's systems that they can't produce fruit or live into their potential as a gift to us all?

Maybe you see yourself as the fig tree: trying to be fruitful but feeling like you're not improving or seeing change in a world that demands productivity. Can you relate? We feel unable to make our lives more spiritual, keep a clean house, keep up with emails, listen well, eat and drink with moderation, exercise as hoped, or be patient with our spouse or children. We feel unable.

Rev. Sarah Speed wrote a poem about the fig tree in which she says:

*Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree  
because she knows  
what I forgot  
many years ago.  
You are still worthy  
even if*

*you don't produce.*

When I see myself in those two characters, I realize I need a gardener, an advocate, someone to believe in me, who will say "Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and nurture it."

"Let it alone" is the same phrase Jesus uses on the cross: "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing." Let it alone. Forgive. Grace, all of grace.

So one more year friends for the gardener to cultivate, prune, fertilize, and see us bear fruit. What kind of fruit is God calling you to bear in the coming year because Jesus is tending the garden of your soul?

One more year...

One more year to do what needs to be done so that Stone Church can thrive.

One more year to use your privilege and power to serve "the least of these."

One more year to believe you are the beloved child of God.

One more year to trust God more than money.

One more year to forgive someone, to forgive yourself.

One more year to lay down your judgment, of yourself and others.

One more year to work on gratitude.

One more year to finally do the interior work of getting to know yourself and your story with a good therapist.

One more year to be fed at the table of God's grace and be enriched by the story of Jesus.

One more year to help somebody else, to play the role of the gardener in someone's life.

One more year.

I want you to know something. Jesus is always saying one more year. He says it every year. He says it right now. You are worthy, and I will cultivate fruit in you in a way that brings you life, not exhaustion.

And, with everything we know about Jesus — in another year when the vineyard owner comes around and our tree isn't exactly brimming with fruit — guess what Jesus will say?

All together: One more year. Amen.