

Luke 13: 1-9

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Dr. David McCreath

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Learning From A Fig Tree

When I first reflected on today's Gospel lesson, I soon thought of Susan, a girl in my high school graduation class. I lived in a small western Illinois town of about 2000 residents, on the banks of the Mississippi River. There were, at best, just under 200 students in the school; our senior class numbered 44. Members of the class had been together for years. My sister and I joined in the fifth grade, so these had been my classmates for close to eight years. We been together in band, chorus, athletic events, and, of course, dating.

Into that mix, at the beginning of our senior year, Susan arrived. Her family had moved to our area from Chicago, where Susan had been in school for previous years. You can imagine what a jolt she received when she arrived. She had to find her way into a well-established matrix of common history and friendships of long standing. Susan was not shy, but she was quiet, and somewhat of a loner. She became, I now think, a fig tree in a vineyard. There was nothing evil or vicious about the situation. She was content to be something of an outsider. There was one teacher, however, who took a liking to Susan, and helped her navigate her situation. That teacher noticed that Susan decorated her notebooks and papers with well-done cartoons and line drawings. The teacher encouraged Susan to use her artistic skills, and, when the annual school yearbook was published, we found Susan's drawings throughout. They added a delightful component to the volume, and Susan received considerable praise for her work. She was no longer just a fig tree, but a person accepted as she had not been before.

I suspect all of us know of persons who have similar experiences to Susan. In fact, I suspect some of us have lived the experience of being a fig tree in the vineyard. I know I have. We often use other terms: we say a person is a "square peg in a round hole;" or "he just never fit in." We can always hope that there will be a teacher or a gardener who will want to help resolve the situation. As is so frequently the case, when one of Jesus' parables fits our lives so well, it is useful to take a closer look at the lessons Jesus wants us to learn.

I.

Let's set this passage in context. In Chapter 10, Jesus has finished his ministry in Galilee, and has turned toward Jerusalem. Earlier in this large section of the Gospel, with the disciples beside him, and followed by a crowd, we have a record of several miracles and familiar parables. In the event of our Scripture passage, someone tells

Jesus about a horrific event in which Pontius Pilate killed some people from Galilee. Another tells of a tower falling, killing several people. The implication of the verses is that the people wondered if those random events came about because the people who died had been unfaithful. Jesus rather sharply responds... those who died were not worse sinners than anyone else. Then comes the punch line: "unless you repent, your fate will be no better than theirs." He does not mean to predict their death was imminent. He does continue with warnings about the coming judgement, and that they should they need to prepare themselves through repentance.

That is tough to answer. We want there to be a reason for human suffering. When we hear of what seems to be random suffering, we tend to wonder where they had gone wrong... we look for a quick answer to explain illness and death. We want the world to have a logical, systematic way with what happens to people. But Jesus does not offer any alternative explanation. Rather, his answer confirms his mission--- repentance is the key. If we attempt to judge those who die tragically, Jesus wants us to know we are no different...we, too, must repent.

There is that strange word, repent. We so often think of it as a "turning around," of thinking and moving in a different direction. Rather, here and elsewhere in the Bible, it refers to a changed mind, to having a different perspective. Jesus, in responding to questions about seemingly random and accidental tragedies, suggests that his listeners should take a moment to reflect on their lives and how they are living them. He seems to say that we all face unanticipated, tragic accidents. So, when we hear of tragedy ... perhaps when a hospital in eastern Europe is bombed ... it should be an occasion for us to turn our lives around, to adjust our perspective, to amend our ways, to align ourselves with the purposes of our Creator. This morning is not the time to explore all of what the word "repentance" means. I believe that exploration is a useful enterprise, hopefully at another time. What we can say is that this Lenten season is an opportunity to look again at our relationships with family, neighbors, and with God, make some adjustments if necessary, and be prepared for the celebration of Easter.

II.

A major element in repentance is God's grace. And grace is an essential element in the parable of the fig tree. One of the commentaries I read came very close to turning the parable into an allegory ... the owner is God, the gardener is Jesus, and the fig tree is Israel. That is, I believe, too much of stretch, and does not enhance the scripture in any way. A parable is a believable story from life, used to teach; it is not an allegory. In this instance, Jesus is using a life event known to the disciples as a lesson in one of the meanings of grace.

We can expect that an apple tree is going to produce apples, a cherry tree will have cherries, and a fig tree will have figs. After three years and no produce, the owner said he had better uses for the land, and instructed the gardener to cut down the tree. The gardener asked that the tree be granted a reprieve. In fact, the gardener's word translated "let it alone" is also the root word from which we get "forgiveness."

In one sense, the gardener is asking that the tree be given a measure of grace. One commentator wrote it this way: "God's grace is not defined as God forgiving us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. Forgiveness in this parable is letting go, of providing another opportunity, along with resources to fulfill its purpose ... to bear fruit. This parable, then, may give us a clue about grace in our lives.

For people of faith, natural catastrophes such earthquakes, storms, and the results of battles and war, raise all sorts of questions that drive us to lament and mourn. Such events shake us out of our complacencies as we live our common lives. How shall we answer such questions, how shall we respond? During this Lenten season will we recognize that God is providing an alternative perspective on life? Can we recognize that God is offering an alternative, one of judgement and of compassion? The parable of the fig tree suggests that we have been given another season in which to see life as a gift. We know that gift is a measure of God's grace, to be lived in a life that often seems precarious; a life we are expected to live as we return God's love in faithfulness to that grace, and in care of our neighbors.

The parable suggests we have been given another opportunity to receive and produce the fruits of love ... a challenge worthy of this Lenten season.

Let us pray.

We are grateful, O God, to learn that we have daily opportunities to receive your grace, and to express that gift in care for your creation and all those who live in it with us. Be with us as we move through these final weeks of Lent, that we might lament and celebrate the death and resurrection of your Son, our Christ, who has given us the gift of new life. Amen