



## Sermon

March 7, 2010  
The Third Sunday in Lent  
Luke 13: 1-9  
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### One More Chance

Jesus is watching the evening news. The usual grim stuff: Pilate's imperial troops senselessly slaughter more Galilean peasants. In Jerusalem a tower collapses, falling on 18 innocent bystanders. Rescue workers are picking bodies out of the rubble.

Terrible tragedies! What do you think about these things Jesus?

His traveling companions are surprised by his answer.

"Do you think that because these poor Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" he says.

Don't people who answer questions with questions drive you up a wall?

Two young women in suburban Philly made a suicide pact and took their lives, jumping in front of a train? Thousands in Chile are digging out from under an earthquake and Tsunami? Haiti is still in shambles. What do you say, Jesus. Are these folk worse sinners than the rest of us Philadelphians?

"No," says Jesus. "Not at all." Then he adds the punch line: "Unless you turn to God, you too will die."

What a jaw-dropping response. Hey Jesus, how about a little sympathy. A word of comfort for grieving parents. A hug for the girl that didn't jump onto the tracks with her friends. Haitians and Chileans don't have any more tears. They are numb, walking around like zombies. People want answers. Holy men have answers. We want an explanation! Get to the bottom of this. Who do

we sue? Or fire? Or investigate? Who's to blame? Lead the way.

Instead of law suits, special prosecutors, blue ribbon panels and public demonstration, Jesus looks at these random tragedies as an opportunity for change of mind and life.

This text is troubling! What makes this scripture any kind of HOLY is Jesus cutting against the grain, thinking in a way so contrary to how we figure the world works.

We don't need much help from Jesus or anyone else to stir up righteous indignation when someone falls prey to undeserved suffering. We whip ourselves up with feelings of resentment and anger in a snap. We are good at blaming, just as good at playing the victim. So it's irritating that just when we're ready to do what comes easily to us – shout foul and puff up with outrage – Jesus deflates our certainty and turns it right back on us. "Unless you turn to God, you too will die.

It's easy to decry the injustice, misdeeds, mistakes, and mishaps of others. It is more difficult, costly and painful to examine our own lives, especially in the wake of "it-could-have-been-ME-or-anyone-in-the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time" type moments.

Imagine the standard explanations Jesus might have given. Religious comfort: "Don't worry; those poor Galileans have gone to a better place." Or trust in God's providence: "There, there. It must have been God's will." Or patience and perseverance: "We'll understand better by and by." Thank heaven Jesus doesn't go there.

Where he does go is to an orchard, a barren fig and a plea for one more chance.

I know a man who planted an apple tree. It grew fairly well, put out new leaves but no apples. The garden center told him apple trees take a year or so to bear fruit. So he waited. No apples. Another year. No apples. A second and third year, not a blossom. The man got rid of the tree. He wanted something fruitful and productive in his yard. "You just got a bad tree," they told him at the nursery. "It happens all the time."

Patience may be a virtue. But there are limits. We're not unreasonably judgmental people. We believe in three strikes then you're out. And foul tips don't count after strike two.

Have you ever struck out? Have limits ever closed on you? I tested the limits once and wound up flunking. I told the teacher I wasn't good at math. The teacher said study every day and you'll do fine. I started off well but little by little fell behind. I was a senior and couldn't imagine anyone failing me. The teacher gave extra homework but I just couldn't get it right. He offered help but I thought I could get by on my own and had better things to do than go for tutoring. Besides, the principal went to my church. Sat right in front us every Sunday. Knew me personally. Was my mother's math teacher! If she heard I was failing, I'd be rescued for sure.

Well, I flunked the final. I flunked the make-up test. The teacher flunked me. I couldn't walk down the aisle with my class. I got what I deserved. That's why we have teachers, principals, ministers, bankers, police, and all the rest – to insure and enforce the boundaries; to hold us accountable for what is expected. Where would life be without boundaries and accountability?

I'm not sure Jesus real good with this sort of thing. One day, his followers asked him about forgiveness. "Are we to forgive people who wrong us, say seven times? (They knew Jesus was big on forgiveness, so he wouldn't accept a low ball number.) Seven times. How do you like those numbers, Jesus, seven times!" And Jesus

replied, "Forgive seventy times seven!" in other words, way past expected limits.

There are other stories to. A shepherd leaves the whole flock to search for one lost sheep. How long does he search? 24 hours? Is that long enough? No, Jesus said the shepherd searched for the one lost sheep until he finds it. Way beyond what we'd expect.

Now this one. A man plants a fig tree and looks for it to produce. It doesn't. He mumbles to himself, "This tree has been pruned to a stub. Fed well. Fertilized. Nothing. Time to cut it down." Sounds reasonable enough. Why should this failing, unproductive tree be robbing nutrients from the rest of the orchard?

BUT the gardener says, "Put some more manure on it, dig around it so there's room for the roots to dig in. Leave it alone. Give it more time."

"God is like THAT," Jesus says. "There is still time."

To all the questions about God we have or will, to all the ways we look for explanations for senseless tragedies, catastrophic disasters, falling towers, bad things happening to good people, for all the ways our righteousness indignation spills out in blaming and victim games, Jesus answers, "Consider the fig tree. Dig around it. Some more manure. Give it time. Who knows, next year may be the year for figs."

Huh? It's a non sequitur. Like saying "I always order the club sandwich and I'm not even a member of the club." It doesn't follow; it's off track and out of whack.

It isn't the answer we were looking for. But Jesus is onto an answer we need. What we need is less about us and our limits, the boundaries we'll settle for, reckoning a person gets what they deserve. What we need, Jesus reckons, is more about God's mercy, more about time to change. "This tree looks like you," he says. Sometimes it looks good. Sometimes not so good. Sometimes like it's gonna blossom. Sometimes like it's hopelessly barren. All the while, God says, "A little more time. A little more manure. A little more

room for the roots to take. Who knows, next season may be the year for figs.”

“I’m so far behind everyone else in church,” someone says. “There is so much of the Bible and church stuff I don’t know. People here know what to do automatically. I can hardly follow.”

My pastoral reply: “Well, let’s dig around you some, spread lots of manure and…” No, I didn’t say that. But I did say: “Rejoice in what God is stirring in you now. Rejoice in the opportunities of this moment. There is still time. Dig in. Come to church. People say my sermons are full of fertilizer but they don’t always use that exact word.”

I’ve worked enough in the corporate world,” a person said to me. “I’m at a place in my life where the amount of money I make is less important than my working somewhere I’ll do something to make a difference.” I thought of the fig tree and Jesus saying, “Rejoice, there’s still time. It’s gonna be a good year for figs!”

We all know of failed marriages and relationships, careers on the skids, lives taking bad turns either by acts of commission, omission or just plain undeserved bad breaks. Victims of circumstance. All the explanations in the world wouldn’t have changed the course. But you’ll see these folk months or years later and they’ll say: “I figured some things out. I said I was sorry. I righted my wrongs as best I could. I started over. I’m giving myself a second chance. I’m going to do better this time. I’ve learned a thing or two from what I’ve been through.”

Sometimes God’s mercy comes in the form of forgiveness, like when Jesus looked down from the cross and prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Sometimes mercy comes in the form of special gift you didn’t expect; a child born, an adoption come through, a windfall of money, a new opportunity out of the blue. Through it all, one of God’s greatest mercies is time. Time to consider your life. Time to begin again.

A word that goes with mercy is patience. Patience is mercy in real time; time for growth to work. Like the fig tree, we don’t know how long

the patience of the gardener will last. So, today is the day to notice, now is the time to read the signs, turn to God, admit the need, the hurt, the broken places, so patience, mercy in time, can root and grow.

There’s a word for this, a Lenten word: Repentance. Repentance is nothing more than Jesus remembering a droopy fig tree given another chance. And in that chance, with the proper nurture and lots of manure, it changes, lives and thrives to abundance it never knew before.

Look at your life and dare to ask the hard questions: Am I being too stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Do I refuse to believe I can be forgiven, carrying a heavy load of guilt? Am I so busy making a living that I’ve forgotten to make a life? Jesus digs at us with questions like these – far more important questions than trying to explain the unexplainable. He digs at our hearts in our restlessness and the outstretched hands of every homeless beggar on the street, every child unfed. He asks, “What have you left undone?”

Such questions, like the ones rooted in the story about the fig tree, move us towards turn-around, moments, believing things can be different; trusting the One who calls us to turn around will be there when it looks like we’re the ones that need to be cut down.

I’m much more impatient than God. You? “You’ve had your chance!” I’ll say. “You haven’t shaped up.” But I’m not God and can’t put words in God’s mouth. Still the gardener comes. “A little more time. A little more manure. Time for a little more sun and rain. I’m doing everything I can to bring this tree back to life. Just a little more time.”

Who knows, this may be your year for figs.

■■■ Amen ■■■