

Isaiah 55:1-9 ~ Luke 13:1-9
Full to the Brim: You are Worthy
 Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 20, 2022
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Introduction:

The story I am about to read from Luke 13 has no parallel in other gospels. It is found only in Luke. If you listen carefully, you will hear Luke interweave divine purpose with divine patience. Above all and through all we see the golden thread of God's mercy. However, this story may perplex and annoy you. It's actually a good warm up for next Sunday, when we get to delve more deeply into God's extravagant grace, with the even longer and more layered parable of the annoying and irksome Prodigal Son, in Luke 15. For today, the parable of the fig tree gives us plenty to chew on.

Let's remember that Jesus uses parables as a teaching tool, not to explain or to provide a linear cause/effect answer. No parable can be reduced, or should be reduced to one simple allegory. Rather, Jesus uses parables to open up the unexplainable to us, to shine a light on a truth we need to see in a new way. Parables add layer and nuance to our understanding of who God is. And if they make you twist and turn a bit, I can see Jesus smiling. It means you're getting it, because Jesus' parables resist closure. They leave us wondering what happens next. And that is up to us.

We'd best get on with it, like the fig tree in the parable: We don't have forever. Let's dive in and see what we see. And then, what *else* we see. I guarantee you, It is good news, for sure. But perhaps not what we want or expect. Because it's Jesus' good news.

Sermon:

Dooley's Garden Shop and Nursery was a small independent local nursery just down the street from our house in Springfield, Ohio and caddy corner to Possum School, where our daughters went from kindergarten – 8th grade. For almost twenty-five years we went to Dooley's for plants in the spring and our Christmas tree in the winter. As a teen, Emily, our oldest daughter, got a job there one summer. What struck me as I stood at the counter to make my purchases over the years, was a sign posted right in eye view, where you couldn't miss it. First line in bold letters it said, "**WE GUARANTEE THESE PLANTS**", second line, smaller letters: "will die if you don't water them!" I will confess I am a rather inconsistent gardener, (you know, I'm all about it in the first weeks of spring and early summer, then, well...it's a long summer). Therefore, this sign, with its jujitsu logic, caught me short every time.

I was reminded of this sign by the way Jesus says to the questioning crowd, not once but twice, "unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die, as they did." The first "they" being the Galileans whom Pilate killed, they were victims of imperial violence. And the second "they" being the eighteen victims of death by something like a natural disaster. The collapse of the tower of Siloam, reminiscent of the grisly collapse of the condominium last June in Surfside, Florida, both raise the troubling question. Why do bad things happen to some people and not others? If only we had a good answer to that one. Jesus' response to their question in this text

was a stern warning: “unless you repent you will die just as they did.” This is certainly not a “go-to” scripture we would choose when offering pastoral care and comfort to someone in distress. At first glance, it can instill fear, rather than comfort. But I invite you to take a closer look with me right now.

Their opening question was about a tragic historical event to which we have no other access. But it opened the door for Jesus to address a problem that perplexes all of us. I will remind you that in the arc of Jesus’ life when this story occurs, he has already set his face to go to Jerusalem. Jesus knew his time on earth was running out. Their question served up a teaching moment for them and for us. We all have big “why” questions that we want answers to. This is certainly toward the top of the list: “Why do bad things happen to some people? How could God let so many bad things happen, especially to so called “good people” if God is really all loving and all powerful? When bad things happen, we want an explanation. And we are more than ready to assign blame. We have a need for causality that makes sense to us.

Like right now we may be asking some of these big questions: Why did COVID-19 become a global pandemic that has already killed over six million people on this earth, disrupting countless more lives and livelihoods? Or why do the innocent people of Ukraine have to experience unspeakable suffering and death at the hands of one tyrant, in a war that threatens to destroy a country and to disrupt our global economy? We may ask this when we are pumping gas and watching the numbers on the pump sky rocket beyond what we have seen before. On a more personal level, when a young person dies from illness, or in an accident, or by their own hand, our hearts break and we want to know why. There are also some of us who reach our nineties and beyond and wonder why we are still living. We want answers that we don’t get in this life.

Of course, we all have our own set of big questions. Perhaps most important of all, there may be some (just a few in this very room, and online) who are asking, for instance, “Why O Lord, did our wonderful wide receiver Davante Adams have to be traded from the Packers to the Las Vegas Raiders?” This is where Isaiah 55 will help us out. Maybe not with the Davante Adams question, but certainly with all the others I mentioned, and those in deep in your heart.

This portion of Isaiah was written to God’s people in exile in Babylon. They were nearing the end of this horrible experience. But it was not over yet. These were words written to Exiles to prepare them for the new challenges their return would present. Words from the prophet were intended to give them hope, to jumpstart their reset. Words to help them resist the temptation to assimilate into the dominant culture of economic extraction, rather than God’s economy of neighborly love. It’s an invitation, with an edge: “Incline your ear and come to me, listen that you may live.” So, picture everyone leaning in, thinking, “Now we’re going to get the answer!”

But what they get is something else. First, a guarantee that God will abundantly pardon. Yes, mercy on tap for all. Gentiles and Jews. And then this, “for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways.” And we respond, “But, God, we want explanations. We can get it. Just explain your ways, please.” I was moved by the depth and the truth of what

Beth Murphy (Lay Preacher and Ruling Elder at First Presbyterian Church in Arpin) wrote in this week's pastoral letter to her congregation: "When we lose someone close to us and feel all the pain that goes along with that loss, we want answers." Beth was writing out of the fresh grief of losing a second brother who died just a couple of weeks ago. She had already experienced the traumatic loss of her other brother who was killed in a car crash only two years ago.

Beth went on, "I know that illness is what causes the body to fail, but why? The "Big Why" is what I'm asking. Why would a good and loving God take someone like my brother so (relatively) early in his life? Admittedly, this is not the first time I've posed this question and genuinely felt entitled to an answer...But the real truth is, I am not. None of us is entitled to that answer... God does not owe us explanations. We don't know what the big plan is, and it's not for us to question God's purposes and intent for how the universe continues to work. We aren't owed a clear understanding of all the mysteries and how they all come together."

Beth's heart felt, insightful reflections reflect Jesus' lesson he gave to the questioning crowd that day. He was teaching them to redirect their energies and thoughts from explanations we are not given, to what God *does* give us. To what God *does guarantee* us, along with the knowledge that one way or another, we will all die. And it is good news. Good news about what we are worth *and* about what we can do. Here's the first piece: **You are worthy**, simply because you are. Even if we feel like a fig tree planted in a vineyard. Somehow different very from those around us. Or like this fig tree because it doesn't produce the expected fruit, but maybe does something *else* that is of equal value in God's eyes. Give it time. Give it what it needs. It is worthy of this.

And here's the second piece and about we can do: We can repent. **We can change our hearts and lives a little more each day.** We can go beyond the mind we have and take a step closer into God's realm, God's way of divine mercy, compassion and justice. I hear Jesus telling us this: don't try to explain what resists explanation; don't revert to blaming and constructing causality that makes sense to you. Instead, redirect that energy and ask yourself, *what am I doing* to heal, to mend, to restore worth and justice where there is none? If it's the political mess we are in, ask what am I, what are we doing to mend and restore our body politic? If it's the destruction of our planet, what am I, what are we, doing to mend and restore it? If it's a relationship that's broken down, what am I, what are we doing to mend and restore it? That's what I hear Jesus telling us. Do what we can to change our hearts and lives, before it's too late.

Repentance is not a one and done experience. Nor is it instant, as much as we might wish it were. Contrary to popular opinion and much of Christian tradition: Repentance, a true change in our hearts and lives, takes time and patience. Our scriptures know this. Consider the number of years in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Even the "Road to Damascus" story about Paul's dramatic conversion, took much longer than the three days recounted in Acts 9. Paul's conversion actually required three years in Arabia before conferring with Cephas and James in Jerusalem, and then another fourteen years before returning to Jerusalem to lay his calling before the apostles gathered there. French theologian and reformer, John Calvin, draws

his understanding of lifelong repentance from the story of Israel, and its forty years in the wilderness. Changing our hearts and lives takes time.

Friends, we do not have forever. What are we waiting for? We know our days on this earth are numbered. We just aren't given the number. That's not part of the deal. But over and over again, Jesus gives us this guarantee: **YOU ARE WORTHY**. You are worthy just as you are, because you are my beloved child. And we're given this choice:

You have the power to change your hearts and lives, today and every day. You have the power to activate God's mercy and compassion in this world of broken hearts and lives, today and every day.

I will give the final words of this sermon to our own Janet Stewart, an FPC member who now lives in Minneapolis. She wrote this poem for Day 17, tomorrow, in our "Full to the Brim" Lenten Devotional booklet. Here it is:

*What are you waiting for?
Stepped off the Carpe Diem,
Just-do-it industrial complex.*

What does it meant to patiently wait?

*What if life isn't a line,
and instead bends round in circles, not
aiming for the finish line*

*We'd find a firm place to stand. A new rhythm.
Where the fruit is good because the tree is watered.*

Amen.