

Giving a Fig  
Lent 3C: Luke 13.1-9  
March 20, 2022  
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It probably won't surprise you to hear that preachers tuck away stories and quotes and anecdotes for use in sermons. My own filing system is rather slipshod. I have a few notes on my phone to help me keep track of them. For instance, on a bus trip in the southwest of England once, we passed through the village of Lyme Regis, which is the home of "Alice's Bear Shop and Hospital for Poorly Bears and Dolls." I thought that was about the best shop sign I'd ever seen so I made a note of it as we drove past. Next to that note are reminders of things like that mortality rates go down during recessions and that our daughter once compared the taste of something to pencil shavings. It's quite a hodgepodge, and now I've wasted several just telling you about the practice of collecting them.

I've also been hanging onto a quote for years that may actually be relevant to this sermon. It's been attributed to sources as grand as Plato, but was actually said by an otherwise forgotten 19th century minister in the Free Church of Scotland. The Rev. John Watson once said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

The thirteenth chapter of Luke begins with an age-old moral question: Does God make heavy things fall on people who do bad stuff? You've wondered this yourself, haven't you? The question is about the moral universe and whether or how God is involved in it. We don't get that question explicitly in the passage, but Jesus's response suggests that people were wondering whether the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their own sacrifices brought this horror on themselves. Jesus says, "No." And he goes further. He asks the people whether they thought that those folks in Siloam whom a tower tipped over on were being punished by God. "Absolutely not," he says. "But... If you don't repent, you've got the same thing coming."

Now this is a little confusing. Jesus seems to be saying that God wasn't at work punishing people in tragic events. Then he says to his innocent questioners, "but you're about to get squashed."

Before we decide what Jesus's moral world view really was, let's pause to notice his first move. He turned the conversation away from those bad folks out there, to the people in the conversation. Ouch. How many conversations have you had about the moral problems of this world that were concerned with people like you and me? When was the last time you heard somebody say, "You know the problem with this world is people like us." Our moral reasoning just doesn't work that way, does it?

And if we did hear someone say such a thing, we'd recommend Prozac. Because it's perfectly fine to think the world's problems can be assigned to skateboarders or stamp collectors. But we expect the stamp collectors think it's all the skateboarders' fault and the skateboarders think it's all the stamp collectors' fault. Being a well adjusted person seems to mean making moral sense of the world by looking at other people's messed up lives and priorities rather than our own.

Jesus doesn't know any better, and says, "Quit worrying about what those Galileans must have done to bring on their misfortunes, and pay some attention to the direction your own life is headed. Repent. Turn around. You're the ones who are headed for disaster."

So Jesus seems to be saying that God doesn't tip tall towers over on people who misbehave—which, as an aside, puts his moral theology in direct opposition to Christian preachers who have claimed everything from AIDS to earthquakes to COVID-19 were results of the wrath of God. But Jesus also says that we can make choices that send our lives in a direction that leads to destruction or a direction that leads to life. We just won't find that life giving direction as long as we're spending our energy figuring out where other people should be headed with their lives. Then Jesus tells a parable. And, as you know, it's in his parables that Jesus takes us into the heart of things.

Now if we read Jesus's parable out of context, if we don't read the scene leading up to it about the people from Galilee and Siloam, we will probably get the parable badly wrong. You remember the story. A certain man planted a fig tree in his vineyard. And the fig tree didn't bear fruit for three years, so he told his vinedresser to cut it down. But the vinedresser said, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Usually it's a cinch that if someone in a parable is called "Master," that person must be a stand-in for God. I'm not ready to say that can't be the case here, but remember, Jesus has just rejected the notion that God was sending destruction on bad people. And the vinedresser is the one who really steals the parable. The vinedresser is the one who turns the plot of the story when he begs the vineyard owner to give the fig tree a year to bear fruit. The vinedresser is the bearer of grace, of mercy, of the possibility of new life, not destruction.

It's striking how the first Christians would come to understand Jesus as the one who makes intercession for us. We see this clearly in the book of Hebrews especially, which describes divine judgement as a rigged courtroom in which God has given over judgment to Jesus, who is the one interceding on our behalf. All of which suggests further that the focus of this parable is not on the impending judgment or the angry judge, but on the vinedresser. On Jesus. On the one who makes space for us to bear fruit.

What a radically different view of the moral life is presented in this story. Jesus moved the conversation away from questions about what vices are bad enough for God to push a tower over on you for, to an image of Christ the vinedresser, giving us time, even fertilizer and care, so that the fruit we were meant to bear in our lives can come forth.

Suddenly the moral life isn't so much about avoiding vices, as it is about practicing virtue. It's about bearing fruit. And it's about realizing that judgment has been put off, that we've been given another year to grow and thrive and produce the gifts our lives were made to give away.

In fact, the moral life might first be about waking up to the gift of this present moment we've been given by God. And maybe if we can stop obsessing about what's wrong with other people's lives we can begin see what's right with ours. We can see that we were meant to bear something into this world, but until we turn from our jealous and judging ways we're wasting the soil we stand upon just like that fig tree that wouldn't produce figs.

Jesus taught that God isn't waiting to wreak havoc on people who go astray, but there is an urgency to our lives, and we may have to change course to find the abundant life we were made for. God is involved in the moral universe. But God is involved by opening up a little time for us. A little time to bear fruit. And if we waste that time fretting over other people's vices, wondering and wishing about whether they'll get what's coming to them, we may not produce the good fruit we're meant to bear into the world. And if we don't know how to make this turn toward the life Jesus is describing, don't you think a first step might be made by scratching onto our doorposts or pecking into our phones or somehow reminding ourselves each day simply to be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle?