

sermon 22.03.20

Seeking God's ways

Lent 3: From earning to receiving

Scriptures

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Focus

As we seek God's way, we move from believing that we must earn our nourishment, our privileges, even our identity as God's children, to an understanding that abundant life is a gift from God to all.

Luke 13: 1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

SERMON:

[Slide show](#)

Do a bit of an experiment with me - if you're here in the sanctuary, look out the windows to your right. Just notice what you see. If you're on zoom, look out a window, and if there are no windows near by, use your imagination. Now shift your gaze and look out another set of windows - here, in this room, or where ever you are. Even when sitting in the same space, we see different things when we look from different angles - a tree, flowers, maybe a road from one perspective... a fence from another. We never quite get the whole picture of a place when we stand inside and look around, but as we move around, looking out from different rooms, different angles, we get a fuller, more complete picture of what's there.

That's how I like to approach parables - considering them from different directions, recognizing that I might not get the full picture, might be surprised by what I see.

For writer and theologian, Matthew Myer Boulton, the creator of the "Vincent Van Gogh and the Beauty of Lent" devotional we're using, he says -

A Parable is like a walk in closet that we can enter, take a look around at the clothes, try a few things on.

I credit Matthew Myer Boulton with many of the ideas shared in my sermon.¹

and so we consider Jesus' parable this morning -a story that comes at the end of 2 chapters full of Jesus exhorting his listeners to get ready; waste no time. Repent. Metanoia... change your mind; change your heart; change your life.

This transformation Jesus calls for is intensely urgent. and to impress this urgency on his listeners, J lays out a series of images, as if to say - think of it like this, or like this, or like this.

It begins in chapter 12, with J saying - to what shall I compare the urgency of repentance, of the need to change one's way of thinking?

over and over Jesus tells his listeners to picture themselves as servants ready for action, lamps lit, for God could come at any time...

He tells them - don't store up treasures here, for this very night your life may be demanded of you...

¹ [Strange New World by Matthew Myer Boulton 3/15/22](#)

he tells them - don't wait - settle your disputes now, before you get to the courthouse.

Don't wait. Be ready.

It's following J's repeated call to get ready that we hear our gospel reading today.

Repent, he says, the way of death is all around us -

J saw it. In his time it was the senseless deaths of the Galileans at the hands of power and the unexpected tragedies of their community.

Jesus said:

“Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

He's telling his listeners that if they choose to not change their minds, they risk perishing -

literally to be ruined in the same way (*ōsautōs*) (**Oh'** - sow-toes) as the Galileans and Jerusalemites. Here, where J says “just as they did”, *osautos* means “suddenly and unprepared.” Jesus is not suggesting that repentance will prevent them from a physical, catastrophic death. Rather, he is stating that changing their minds will prepare them for whatever they will experience. Repenting, this new way of seeing and thinking and believing shows there is hope for the future; repenting means we won't be caught off guard; unprepared.²

Jesus seems to be saying:

Being unprepared, the 'same way' as the ways of the world, that way leads to death. So change paths, get on the way of life; get on the way of love and justice -and then... and then

“he told them this parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard...”

(START SLIDE SHOW)

² [Commentary on Luke 13:1-9 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

But there's a problem.

The fig tree is not bearing fruit. Fruit trees are supposed to be fruitful.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, (3. 9)(SLIDE 2)

We hear John the Baptist warning "even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down..."

John told them, Jesus tells them: the time has come to change your life. Bear fruit.

(SLIDE 3)

This fig tree is barren - but not without hope. Together, the owner and gardener decide to give it one more year. Tend it, care for it... believe in its ability to change.

So, as we sit with this parable today, what might it be asking of us?

If I'm to heed Jesus' urgent call to bear fruit, what does that look like? What fruit am I to bear?

The answer is here, in our parable, hiding in plain sight:

Take a moment, close your eyes if it helps, and picture your favorite tree

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- maybe in your yard, maybe a nearby park. What does it look like? Is it so tall you can't reach the branches?

SLIDE 5

Out in the open, or tucked in among others? Look closely, Does it house bird nests, or squirrel nests?

You can't imagine a specific tree without also imagining its place - the land and weather and creatures around it that make it possible.

SLIDE 6

And all the ways it, too, helps nurture and support its community. A tree's wisdom is always local.

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It bears fruit, or leaves or flowers, in response to local conditions, including the nutrients, the fertilizer that's close at hand.

Your favorite tree, that one in mind -

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if it's an oak, it's not going to produce figs. Never, no matter how much you dig around it and fertilize it. That tree is made to produce acorns - to feed the deer, house the cardinal, send its tap root deep into the earth, stabilizing soil, standing tall.

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Maybe you're more like a redbud, tucked back in the forest, with a quiet beauty.

What fruit are you, are we, to bear?

What would the fig tree say?

Or your favorite tree?

It might say, 'start where you're planted, and reach up and out from there.

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bear fruit according to who you are. Figs, acorns, delicate flowers... Bear the fruit you were created to bring into the world.

And if you're not sure, ask around. Ask the people who know you best.

You see, every tree is a symbiotic mix of microbes and fungi and bugs and birds and other critters too - not to mention the surrounding trees - some which are competing, some which are helping out. At its best, that's what human community looks like too - an orchard, a grove, a forest, bearing fruit.

Jesus' point is this: We are born to bear fruit. tangible actions, tangible results of love and justice and caring for the world. and the situation is urgent. Pressing. There's time, but no time to waste. Bear fruit. Lay down fertilizer so that others may do the same. but do it now, today. don't wait.

my guess is you know what fruit you want to bear. you've been dreaming of it in your house, or your neighborhood - your little corner of the earth.

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Jesus is urging his listeners, urging us, if we're listening, to start where we are planted, to reach up and out, to team up and to thrive. That's why we're here. to take an active, practical part in the world's redemptive transformation.

SLIDE 12

Why this urgency? Because too often the paths we're on are barren - leading to corrosion, complacency, death.

Jesus calls us instead to reorient ourselves, to fruitfulness, restoration and life. For Jesus, that's what repentance is all about. To step off the paths of death and come to life.

Here's an idea:

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take a pilgrimage, out to that favorite tree, and spend some time with it. Notice what helps it thrive, to produce - or maybe, what does it need?

Jesus is knocking on the door of our lives... to what shall we compare the urgency of repentance? the urgency of love and justice? the urgency of changing our minds and hearts, so that we bear fruit, reach out, live up to the calling for which we were born?

Consider your own life. Start where you're planted. Notice what inhabits your ecosystem, and reach up and out from there.

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Bear fruit according to who you are.

Don't try and be, or produce, something you're not.

God created you, a beloved child, to bear the fruit you were created to bear.

That fruit of the spirit is infinitely different -

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Sometimes it comes in the form of a phone call, where you hold the pain of another.

SLIDE 16

Sometimes that fruit looks like a line of strollers in a Polish railway station - waiting and ready to receive the babes of refugee mothers crossing the border³...

SLIDE 17

Or those creative people who are booking Airbnb's in Ukraine - with no intention of going there, but to get money to residents who are facing extreme financial hardship because of the invasion.

SLIDE 18

For celebrity chef Jose Andrés' charitable organization World Central Kitchen (WCK), producing fruit is feeding thousands of Ukrainian refugees.⁴

So many ways to bear fruit. Good, life giving fruit.

SLIDE 19

Parables challenge us to see in new ways; think in new ways - and act in new ways. Ways that bring about repentance - that process of seeing that God has made holy the ground - whatever ground - we find ourselves on.

SLIDE 20

The season is now, my friends. Bear fruit.

³ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/dinge-die-uns-gerade-hoffnung-machen/>

⁴ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/jose-andres-food-shortages-ukraine-russia/>