

Third Sunday in Lent  
March 3, 2013  
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## “A TIME FOR PRUNING”

Isaiah 55:1-12 Luke 13:1-9

Both the Isaiah passage and the gospel lesson today contain warnings. “Why do you invest your life in that which does not satisfy?” the prophet pleads. Jesus tells a parable that warns us of the importance of nurturing that which we most value in our lives – for we do not know how much time we have.

In our 21<sup>st</sup> century society warnings are plentiful; sometimes to the point of absurdity. Product warnings are issued with every imaginable commodity. I remember the last time we purchased a new iron. With the iron came an operator’s manual, and the entire first three pages were warnings. It turned out that underwater use of our new iron was not recommended, and we were further advised that we would be rewarded with better results if we removed the articles to be ironed from our bodies before attempting to iron them.

Some warnings are big and loud and impossible to miss. Other warnings are subtle; for example, warnings that point to the breakdown of important relationships – between wife and husband; between parent and child; between friends or co-workers – these warnings are more like that “still small voice” that Elijah finally heard – too easily ignored or dismissed in the busyness of life. But the cost of failing to pay attention to these relationship warnings is potentially enormous. The warnings in Jesus’ parable are more like this. Let’s look at the parable a little closer.

Theologically, the parable raises questions about how God can be just and good when the world seems to be so terribly unjust and full of evil. In my experience, this kind of question about God comes up more often than all other kinds of questions about God put together. The fancy theological word for this concept is “*Theodicy*.” There are many arguments that come up in discussions about how evil can exist in a world created by a good and just God:

- God leaves us free to choose good or evil;
- Evil is a consequence of human sin;
- Justice comes only in the afterlife; evil is a necessary complement to good;
- Evil is used by God for the spiritual development of humankind; or
- Acceptance of the doctrine of dualism – that the universe has an evil being or force nearly as powerful as God. – to name a few.

In real life, questions about theodicy usually sound something like this: “What did my sister do to deserve this?” or “Why did this happen to me?” or, “Why is my child suffering?”

This impossible question—“*How can God be good and all-powerful when evil and injustice and suffering exist in the world?*”—this is the issue that Jesus is taking on in the parable we read this morning.

The world in which Jesus lived had solved this problem by deciding that suffering was a sign of sinfulness. Or to put it another way: it is our own sinfulness and disobedience that causes God to punish us with illness, financial hardship, or even something as extreme as the death of loved ones – that when these things happen to us it

means we have been bad. **God is just**—that was the primary concern to the ancient Hebrews; not God’s goodness. And so Jesus’ contemporaries believed it was just and right for those who are sinful to be punished.

This idea is seen frequently in both Old and New Testaments. As he challenges this worldview Jesus refers to two incidents that were familiar to the crowd.

1. Some Galileans had been killed by Pilate when they came to the Temple to offer sacrifices. Jesus asks, “*Were these people worse sinners than all the other Galileans?*”
2. Then Jesus mentions an accident in a section of Jerusalem called Siloam, where a tower fell and killed 18 people. Again Jesus asks, “*Were these eighteen worse offenders than all people who live in Jerusalem?*”

Remember that the Galileans and the residents of Jerusalem did not hold each other in the highest regard. Jesus makes sure to include both groups in his examples of who were the worst sinners!

The implied answer to the rhetorical question in each of Jesus’ examples, of course, is “*No.*” Those who died were *not* worse sinners than those who did not die. Jesus is standing in the face of tradition here; he is defying the accepted wisdom of the day.

And why does he do this? Because, in Jesus’ view the wisdom of the day presented an understanding of God that was false. Jesus’ message is: **God does not send suffering and misery to us when we have been disobedient or sinful; God does not cause our pain.**

Jesus’ parable, however, does ask us to think seriously about the relationship between suffering, repentance, and judgment. We may think at first that this parable is primarily about judgment, but if we look more closely, we can see that the parable focuses on mercy and patience just as much as judgment, or maybe even more.

The man who owns the field is ready to cut the tree down because it didn’t bear fruit (that’s judgment). But the wise gardener calls upon the owner to wait. “Let it alone, sir... let me aerate the soil and put some nice compost on it. Then if it does not produce, you may cut it down.”

This is patience, or forgiveness, or grace. The patience of the gardener is reminiscent of what we know about God’s forgiveness and grace, isn’t it? Even though he had said to the crowd earlier, “*Unless you repent you will all likewise perish*”—which seems focused on judgment, when he tells the parable, Jesus speaks instead of God’s grace.

But what about judgment? I like the passage in Amos 7:8 that compares God’s judgment to a builder’s plumb line. A plumb line does not write up rules and commandments and then issue orders to punish those who do not obey the rules. A plumb line does only one thing: it presents to the builder an example of that which is true and sound and perfect. This is what happens when we compare ourselves to Jesus. God does not condemn us; rather, our weaknesses and failings become apparent—we can see how it is that we fall short of what God intends us to be.

Jesus emphasizes the grace of God. Yet there is much in human life to indicate that we cannot indefinitely put off setting our lives and relationships right. The parable of the Fig Tree is a message of God’s grace and at the same time a word about the urgency of turning around those parts of our lives that are pulling us away from those whom we love—including God.

The fig tree was given one year. But sometimes we may not have a year. In this season of Lent, are there those from whom you have been separated—whether because of harsh words or a misunderstanding, or just from a neglect of the relationship? What might you do to help heal and restore the relationship?

My Master Gardener wife tells me that compost is one of the most nourishing, life-giving things for a tree. What about relationships? What kinds of things are most nourishing? What might we do to restore life and the fruits of friendship and trust to that relationship? Jesus reminds us that it may not be wise to delay, because we never know how much time we will be given.

This season of Lent leads us to consider the life and example of Jesus. Jesus chose to live a life of compassion, mercy, humility and healing. As I stressed last week, his mode of life was not determined by those who opposed him and ultimately took his life, but rather by a desire to be faithful to that which God had called him. Jesus calls us to find this same resoluteness in living our own lives.

Two final words of warning: for best results, spread manure on your trees, but not on your friends and relatives; and try to remember not to iron that shirt while you're still wearing it.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.