

Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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"For the Love of Figs"

Luke 13: 6-9

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The biblical authors, the gospel writers especially, are crafty storytellers... there's always more than meets the eye on first reading. If you open a text with any curiosity and just look carefully, there's much to see.

Like in Luke, you can see that he places things just so... setting this story besides that one, to suggest a meaning... or maybe even prompt a conversation. Luke's thinking... **"Now, how can I get them talking about this down at the church house.**

Sunday School was so flat last week...

Maybe if we read these two stories back to back

everyone would sit up and say, huh?

Maybe they'd start wrestling with these truths."

So Luke relates the parable about the fig tree but before he does that, he tells a story where some folks remind Jesus about a terrible tragedy where Pilot had killed some Galileans and **"mixed their blood with their sacrifice,"** yuke! It was a horrible, headline of a story. Everyone remembers it... remembers where they were when they learned of the horror of it.

It's Columbine...

It's 9-11...

Someone in the crowd says... **"What about those Galileans, Jesus? Remember them..."** Implying maybe, tragic as it was, they must have had it coming to them. Skeletons in the closet, don't you know.

Jesus sees where they're going. **"You think that those folks were somehow worse sinners than everyone else... or any of you? Nope... Repent... or you'll perish too."**

And as if that wasn't answer enough to throw us all into a tailspin, Jesus says, **"And remember that other headline? Remember when that tower fell in Jerusalem and killed 18 innocent people?"**

Remember when the bus turned over in the rain last year?

Remember when the tornado hit?

Remember the tower?

"Well, it didn't fall on them because they weren't holy enough... it just happened. Bottom line? Quit worrying about all that, look at your life and repent or perish."

Well, I just hate that... I hate it when Jesus goes to sounding like some Old Testament prophet. I like to think of Jesus as over here and all those Old Testament Prophets over there... and it just messes me up good to hear him talk this way.

Not that Jesus' meaning is clear at all in this moment. On the one hand, he's saying, **"Quit thinking bad things only happen to bad people... there's no connection... Quit thinking you're in the clear...**

because you've got your health

and your kids haven't messed up much...

and your garage is filled with new cars."

There's no connection between your spiritual state and your portfolio or whether or not you've got bad acne or bad luck. Every last one of you need to be repenting, turning towards God and if you don't you'll perish."

Wish I could ask Jesus what he meant. It does have us leaning forward... saying **"huh?"** and all that. **"You're headed towards death and if you don't turn around you're going to walk right off the cliff."** Is he saying that? Or is he saying, **"God's going to have had enough of your rebellion someday."**

We don't know... but we do have Luke positioning these stories... and perhaps suggesting some meaning and certainly stirring up the conversation at Sunday School.

It's interesting, because, you have this dialogue about God's judgement.

"Straighten up or perish." And you have this parable. And you have the little, conjunction, **"then"** in between them. It's a connector, isn't it... **"Then."**

Then is one of the most important words in scripture. And Luke uses it again here. Jesus rocks them (and us) back with a line that sounds like something John the Baptist would be proud of... and then he tells them a parable.

"Repent or perish... now that puts me in mind of a story."

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard." Of course, I don't know for sure, but I get the impression this is like Jesus saying, **"A certain man plowed up his corn crop and put in a baseball field."** What a goofy thing! **"If you plant it, figs will come."** It's goofy to plow up your cash crop...

It's a small place.

Not a lot of good soil around...

You don't cut down grapevines to make room for a fig tree.

Some of our Baptists Forebears might suggest that he removes the vines and is changing crops because he's beginning to see the error of his wine-making ways... but I suspect not.

He does this for the love of figs. He's a fig fanatic. Loves them anyway you can make them or eat them or serve and there are all sorts of ways. There's...

Fig jelly and fig jam...

Fig Newtons and Fig pies..

Fig Cobblers and Figgy Pudding

"Thays" raw figs, boiled figs, fried figs, dried figs...

Fig kabobs, figs in a blanket, figs on a cracker, figs and cream...

Fig soup, fig stew, fig bisque...

"Thays" figs and rice, figs an "taters".

"Figs on a stick, figs on a steak, chipped figs on toast."

"Thays" fig salads and fig caserols..

Peanut butter and figs...
 Figs on a log...
 And I think that's about it."

My point is that this guy liked them... he's a fig fanatic. His motivation isn't profit... it's enjoyment. Pleasure not produce. So, he plants a fig tree... and he waits... and waits... He can just taste it. Figs in the morning, figs in the evening, figs at suppertime.

He waits... and after a year goes out.
 No figs... not so unusual maybe.

So he waits another year, taste buds on edge... but no figs.

Year three rolls around. **"Surely this year."** He gets his hopes up and pulls out his Martha Stewartstein Fig Recipe Book (he got it real cheap). But still no figs and while he is a fanatic, he's also a realist and knows the tree is probably sterile. So he says to his gardener, **"Better cut it down... it's hopeless... and just wasting soil."**

He doesn't seem mad at the tree, just honest about it.

I mean, it's not like it's the tree's fault, right. In fact, I suspect the tree was even more disappointed than he was. She was so excited when she was first planted. She knew her purpose was to bear fruit... but she didn't... she couldn't.

She would strain harder... thinking she must need more of something out in her limbs... but still, even with all her trying, no figs.

She talked to the birds and other animals that sat in her branches and got advice. Some suggested she needed to concentrate more... others said she should just relax... and others told her to pray harder.

Lot's of theories were offered as to what the problem was.

Everything from the gardener planted her in the wrong place to it's because you're alone and you can't have figs without having two trees.

One pesky bug even suggested with a conniving smile that it must have been that she was rotten inside... it was really hard not to believe the bug.

She wanted nothing more than to bare figs for the owner of the vineyard. She tried everything but nothing worked... and when she heard those words, **"Cut it down,"** she was almost relieved.

But the gardener was scratching his head... and he says, **"Leave it alone."** **"let it be..."** is what he says. The word here is, "aphes," which is a word Jesus likes... **"aphes."**

It's the word Jesus will use in a few weeks from the cross when he asks God to forgive those who are killing him. **"Aphes," "Let it be forgiven, they don't know what they're doing."**

That's what the fig tree hears...

She's as good as dead...

she is dead...

no fruit and no capacity to change that.

She's just taking up space and the verdict comes in from the owner and the gardener who knows and who hopes says... **aphes... "let it be."**

And it's not just more wishful thinking, he's got a plan... an idea about injecting something into the situation that might change things.

"I'll dig around it and fertilize it." That's the nice NIV translation anyway... fitting for church. What he really says is, **"Let's put some poop on it... some dung... some manure."** Something organic and alive... **"It's possible to change things in this garden."**

What a nice parable. All Luke's readers love it, then and now, us and them... It's a story about forgiveness and grace... and anyone who's ever starred at the empty branches of their own life has to be more than a little moved by it.

This is the Jesus we know...

where there's always a second chance.

This is the Jesus we love.

But then there is that other story... the one about judgement and repentance and perishing... and something in us wants to say, **"Jesus would you just make up your mind"** or maybe just ignore that altogether... but Luke would say back to us, **"he's got you right where he wants you... wrestling with this."**

There is in the Biblical Revelation... a word of judgement. It's a word about the way things are and a word about the way God wants them to be. It's a word that reminds us, that while God's love isn't conditioned, God's love expects.

It's unloving not to expect...

Love pays for a freshman's tuition...

books and housing...

and expects that the student will care and be a good steward of the gift and the opportunity. That's love. And when the report card comes... and it's clear there was more partying than studying... love says, **Enough! Repent or come home and work for a semester or two."**

Judgement! But then... there's this parable about the figs that says there's something else in play... a kind of Divine patience... a willingness to do something.

So, the student comes home after the first semester... .7. Another chance is given, 1.2. And then another, .9... no fruit. The parent is about to lower the boom but a neighbor says, **"You know... it took me a while to get going academically... give it one more semester, and maybe some tutoring."**

There is judgement... but there is grace... and they're on the same parable. And in the same gospel... both are there. Is it a chicken and egg thing? Which thing leads to repentance and change, and good grades and good fruit and good lives... judgement or grace? Is there one without the other. Which comes first?

You know me... I want to shout out, **"its grace."** That's the good news. But... but... does the good news make any sense without the bad news.

Is it grace, if I've never looked at my branches and admitted that whatever fruit I can conjure up is lacking or kind of wormy at best. If the gardener ignores my fruitless life, isn't that indifference and not grace?

But on the other hand... can I ever be honest about my fruit if I haven't known the grace of this gardener?

Did you notice that this parable doesn't end? Most parables leave you hanging... so the Good Teacher wants you to wonder about it and write it yourself. This is one of those deals where you can have alternate endings. It could end like this...

“Verily... (all parable have that in them) Verily, yea verily... the tree was so touched and moved and blessed by the second chance, that she finally was able to relax and to trust... and cooperate with the gardener. She wasn't so defended and rebellious and the fertilizer went down deeper and deeper and the next year, the owner had figs on his toast.”

That ending knows the Gospel, doesn't it? **I'm so loved... so I want to love back. I'm loved, so I can loved... graced so I can grace... forgiven, now I can grow just about anything.”**

Or how about this ending... this is the alternate ending I really like... **“Verily... the next year, there were still no figs... even after all the manure was spread. Yea, verily, the tree really was dead and the only option was for the owner to face that and cut her down and he did. And he just left the old stump... But... three days later, he went for a walk in the vineyard and he was shocked to look down and see that there was a little green shoot coming up out of that old, fruitless stump.”**

That's the gospel, isn't it, **“I am nothing... fruitless... I was good as dead... but by some miracle of grace, I'm have been raised up. I have died and am being raised up and there's fig jelly on the master's table.”**

So... the grace is in the judgement and the judgment is in the grace. Either way, at the end of it all, God, for the love of you, is going to have fruit. God is fanatical about you and just nuts about this world. That's good news... God is bent on enjoying what your branches can bear. And all us fig trees said, Amen.

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