

Full to the Brim – You Are Worthy
Luke 13:1-9
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Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other – a concept promoted by renowned, 20th century, theologian Karl Barth. Barth encouraged preachers to read, study, and analyze both sources: scripture and current events. As followers of Jesus, we rely on the Bible to help us understand and interpret the news and the world around us. These days, there are plenty of events to interpret. Do we think it would have been any different in Jesus' day?

In today's gospel lesson, the disciples listen to Jesus respond to a conversation about two, terrible tragedies. Jesus responds with a question, asking his listeners about the correlation between sin and suffering. Do people suffer because they have committed sins? Does this explain Pilate's massacre in the Temple and the tower disaster in Siloam? Are these events evidence of God's punishment?

Jesus answers his own questions with a resounding, "NO!" He completely rejects this common calculation between sin and suffering. The math does not add up.

Once he corrects the common misconception, Jesus chooses not to enter further into an abstract discussion of sin and suffering. Curiously, he changes the conversation from the murdered worshippers and the people killed in the tower collapse. Jesus shifts the focus, and he makes it personal. Jesus invites his audience to examine themselves and their own lives: "*Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*"

WHAT?!?!? In response to a serious question about sin and suffering, why does Jesus talk about our repentance? Sometimes Jesus drives me crazy!!!

On this third Sunday in Lent, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is nearing its end. He doesn't have much time left, and there is an urgency to his conversations. Jesus has crucial, time-sensitive, life-giving information to impart before he dies on a cross. We are not encountering a gentle, mild, laidback Jesus. His response seems rather harsh, judgmental, and unsettling.

What on earth is Jesus trying to tell us???

The word for repentance in Greek is *metanoia*. It means turning around – making a U-turn; doing an about-face. *Metanoia* is radical transformation. Jesus calls us to a complete change of heart and mind.

And then – as Jesus frequently does – he illuminates his knowledge with a story. Jesus tells a parable to make his point:

A landowner has a fig tree in his vineyard. The landowner goes looking for fruit on the tree, but finds none. Exasperated, he explains to his gardener: "For three years I have looked for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it waste the soil?" In response, the gardener pleads for more time: "Sir, let the tree alone for one more year. I'll dig around the tree and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.

This parable of “The Barren Fig Tree” might more appropriately be titled “The Gracious Gardener.”¹ Here Jesus emphasizes the goodness, generosity, and love of God. As Jesus has done on previous occasions, he proclaims the good news of SECOND CHANCES. God grants people opportunities to repent and begin again. With this merciful gift of a second chance, you and I are urged to grow good fruit. Jesus invites us to a more faithful and fruitful life, for the flourishing of God’s kingdom.

With the recent, serious illness and death of my father, I have been more clearly reminded of my own mortality. I do not have an infinite number of days. At some point, I too will pass on from this life. With this reminder, I do feel an urgency to live in loving, generous, and fruitful ways NOW – before I run out of time.

As I mentioned earlier, these days there is no shortage of tragic, world disasters: the deaths of more than 6 million people worldwide from the pandemic, the ongoing climate crisis, and the horrific and devastating war in Ukraine. Perhaps, instead of pointing fingers at who is responsible, Jesus is inviting you and me to BE THE CHANGE we yearn to see in the world.² How should we be living our lives and bearing fruit for the benefit of others and for the healing of our world?

Jesus speaks with urgency, but NOT from fear of God punishing us. Instead, Jesus sees the dire need for each of us to bear good fruit. You and I are blessed – blessed by God’s grace – to be a blessing for others. There is something in us – in you and me – that is waiting to bloom, to blossom, to bear fruit. God wants each of us to participate in making the world a safer, more hospitable, and loving place.

In the letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are able to produce this good fruit until our final days.

While you might feel you are in a barren season, or in need of a radical change of heart and mind, the good news is God gives us extra time. God has extended the deadline, and we are in a GRACE period. Thankfully, God “believes in us far more than we believe in ourselves.”³

The parable of the fig tree and the gracious gardener is a reminder that God does the work of nurturing and nourishing. By God’s amazing grace, we are given additional opportunities to grow and blossom. Indeed, you and I are worthy of a second chance, so we might BE a blessing to others. And trust God to bring into your life something or someone to spread the fertilizing manure necessary for that new, life-giving growth!!

So, how will you and I respond to God’s extravagant grace and mercy? What will we do with the precious gift of today? And tomorrow? And the rest of whatever life we have? During our remaining lifetimes, may our hearts be FULL TO THE BRIM with God’s goodness and generosity, so our lives OVERFLOW with the good fruit of God’s love – this day and every day. May it be so. Amen.

¹ Joanna M. Adams, “On Cutting The Fig Tree,” sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago on June 23, 2002.

² Often credited to Mahatma Gandhi.

³ Kayla McClurg, “Known By What Is Absent,” *Inward/Outward: a project of Church of the Saviour*, March 19, 2022