

*The Gift of Time*  
Luke 13:1-9  
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The story was wonderful, yet heartbreaking at the same time. It is hard to imagine a mother joyfully encountering her first grader covered in blood, but on that day a living 6 year-old, even covered in blood, was a blessing beyond measure. When Adam Lanza broke into the Sandy Hook grade-school in Newtown Connecticut, he entered two first grade classrooms. We will never know whether the choice of 6 year-olds was accidental or by design. He slaughtered those two classes – slaughtered them all with their teachers except for one. The news reports said that the child ‘played-dead,’ but maybe she was just lucky. When she met her mother, the child said, “I’m ok, Mommy, but all my friends are dead.”

Our text this morning from the gospel of Luke shows Jesus in ongoing conversation with his disciples and a group identified only as ‘the crowd.’ Our verses come after teachings about the Christian life – don’t be hypocrites, don’t be greedy, strive for the kingdom because God knows what you need; God cares so much that the very hairs on your head are numbered; share the good news; keep alert, always be prepared for the return of the Son of Man. Then Luke tells us that some in the crowd told Jesus of some Jews from Galilee who had been murdered by Pilate’s henchmen. The Jews were killed while offering sacrifices in the temple – while they were performing their religious duties. Although we have no extra-biblical information about such an event, it is totally consistent with Pilate’s brutal ways. It seems that Jesus hears this information as a criticism of those who were killed or at least as an insinuation that their death must have said something bad about them. Jesus reacts in a challenging manner: Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Likely that is exactly what the crowd thought. The belief that suffering was punishment for sin was common in that culture. It’s actually also all too common in our culture. Immediately Jesus confronted this idea, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will perish as they did.” Jesus has subtly changed the meaning for he is not implying physical death to the crowd, but rather spiritual death, separation from God, as the price for not repenting. Once engaged in the debate, Jesus himself brings up a similar, but different example. Some folks had been killed when a tower – the tower of Siloam – the location is unknown to us – the eighteen had been killed when the tower fell. Even though this death is different – it is accidental, the Galileans were murdered – the situation is similar in that the deaths do not indicate that the victims were worse sinners than others. Again we hear “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

To drive home his point Jesus told a parable. A fig tree was planted in a vineyard. It was a not uncommon practice to plant fig trees in with grape vines, but the soil was valuable. The tree

had only one purpose – to produce figs. Fig trees did not give decent shade nor were they grown for their wood. It was all about the figs, so when the tree is not producing three years after it should have been heavy laden with fruit, the wise decision; the economically sound decision; the sensible anyone-would-do-it decision, was to cut it down. Enter the gardener. Anyone of us who gardens or, as in my case, has house plants, can empathize with that gardener. Who among us hasn't worked to rescue some tree or bush or plant? Who has not experienced a sense of mourning when a plant or tree we have had for years reaches the end? So the gardener pleads, "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." Give my little tree one more chance; I have been coaxing it; I will work with it some more; I will do all I can to help it. Give it one more year.

So, what do we do with this familiar text? It is tempting to make an allegorical interpretation. An allegorical look would say something like, 'the landowner' is God and the gardener is Jesus. It is common to do that, but it is not terribly productive because it narrows the text too much. Jesus has been teaching the crowd that suffering is not the result of sin, but then he rather curiously tells the crowd that if they don't repent they will suffer – at least in the ultimate sense. That seems contradictory at first. If the sin of Pilate's victims did not cause their murders and if the sin of the folks in Jerusalem was not the reason for their accidental deaths, why would our sin, our failure to repent, be the cause of our perishing? One part of the answer is that when Jesus speaks of perishing he speaks of spiritual, not physical, death. Sin, at least not our sin, does not cause others to murder us; our sin does not cause towers to fall on us; sin does not cause cars to crash or planes to crash into buildings we inhabit; sin does not cause cancer; sin does not cause fires or tornadoes to destroy our homes. Sin does, though, separate us from God – that is the ultimate perishing – separation from God.

Ok. We all know that. Sin is, by definition, separation from God, which is ultimately, by definition, spiritual death. The parable is the heart of Jesus' point. What did the fig tree do wrong, if we may be pardoned for suggesting that a tree can do wrong? What the tree did 'wrong' was to do nothing. It did not do the one thing it was supposed to do – produce figs. The tree's sin is a sin of omission, a failure to be what it was called to be – a tree that produced figs. The story, though, does not end there. The tree is to have a reprieve. It is to have one more chance – time to get it right; time to do what it was supposed to do; time to stop just standing there and produce figs - a gift of another year.

The story of that bloodied six-year old who told her mommy that all her friends were dead, was told to the media by her pastor, who counseled her mother. Although the child is too young at six years to feel it, her mother was struggling with survivor's guilt. Survivor's guilt is that complex set of emotions common among folks who randomly survived something when

others perished whether in a plane crash or on 9/11 or in a ship sinking or a house fire. That mother lived knowing that all those other parents – parents with whom she had likely waited for the kids to get out of school, parents with whom she had arranged play-dates, or to whose home she had taken her little girl for a birthday party – all those other parents had lost their precious little ones – and she still had her daughter. She and her child had the gift of time to fight with each other and make up; to struggle with missteps and ask for forgiveness. She still had time with her child – time to teach her; time to watch her grow and thrive and develop; time to see her through tests and grades, through scouts and proms and SATS and someday a wedding and becoming a mom herself. They had time.

Have you ever felt like you have gotten a reprieve? Have you been late to the airport only to find that the plane was delayed anyway? Have you forgotten a date with a friend only to find them apologizing to you because they had forgotten too? Have you worried about a test and breathed a sigh of relief when the results came in? Have you done something you felt terrible about – told someone else’s secret or gossiped about a friend – then worried that you had ruined an important relationship only to find yourself forgiven and restored?

The core of Jesus’ story is in the words of the gardener – give it one more year; let me work with it a bit. One more year – a reprieve. That is the point. That is what separates us from those Galileans whom Pilate killed or those crushed by the tower of Siloam or the folks in the World Trade Center on 9/11 or the children and teachers at Sandy Hook school. One more year is what separates us from them all because we still have time. That one more year – whether it is our last or just the first of one more and one more and one more for many more to come – is pure gift from God. Indeed, each and every year is a gift from God, an opportunity to get it right; an opportunity to arrange our lives as models of kingdom living, to produce fruit.

Now a word of caution is in order here. When we say that time is a gift from God, we are not saying that God caused the tragedies of others. Rather, we are saying that all of life is God’s gift. What we have is a reprieve in the form of God’s grace to get right those things we have not gotten right to this point. While we are still living we still have time because God graciously gives us chances to turn over a new leaf, to stop doing nothing and to do what we are supposed to do – bear fruit. What does bearing fruit look like? What does it look like?

[loving neighbor; being caring, compassionate, kind, giving, giving to those in need; speaking out for the voiceless in our society; taking an open and active stand against injustice; acting to protect God’s good creation; turning from consumerism – paring down, simplifying our lives, getting rid of all that stuff we keep just to make us feel secure, that is, trusting God more and our own stuff less; being compassionate towards the poor and needy – recognizing that their situations are likely more complex than we understand; listening, really listening, to others – those in our personal circle, but also those who are far different than we are]

We all know what kingdom living looks like. It's no mystery to us. The mystery is why we have such a difficult time living as God wants us to live. We have a God who gives us lots and lots of chances, though not endless chances, to get it right. We have a God who loves us, wants what is best for us, and gives us detailed instructions, but still we have a hard time getting on board. We have a God who says, 'Return to me' and offers us a place of eternal joy, but somehow we seem to think that we have a better way – even though our way, at best, leads only to death and the cold, dark grave.

Our God is a God of second chances, but the offer is not endless. If after a year it does not bear fruit, cut it down. Cut it down. That's stark, isn't it? It's not popular to speak about judgment in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. We like our Jesus tame, mild, humble, and sweet. We like our God to be all grace and mercy for us, though we might accept a bit of judgment for those others. As we have noted before, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr famously described our Western Christianity as "A God without wrath brought [a people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Whether it offends our modern sensibilities or not we do not have a God without wrath; we are a people who sin regularly enough to have sent the one who loves us to the torment of the cross. With all of that whether we like it or not, judgment is part of the package. God is love. God loves us. God offers grace, mercy, and a wonderful, joy-filled life eternal, but God also is judge. Whether we stand before the Judge as ones who have made good use of God's gracious offer of yet one more chance or as ones who have continued to do nothing, is entirely up to us. It will not go well for those who do nothing, but will be very good indeed for those who respond with gratitude shown by changed lives. I leave you with the words of poet Toyohiko Kagawa:

I read  
In a book  
That a man called  
Christ  
Went about doing good.  
It is very disconcerting to me  
That I am so easily  
Satisfied  
With just  
Going about.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, "Toyohiko Kagawa," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toyohiko\\_Kagawa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toyohiko_Kagawa)

