

“Changing While There’s Time”

Series: *The Cost of Following Jesus*

Scripture: Luke 13:1-9

Rev. Pen Peery

March 23, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

During Lent we are reading and preaching on Scripture that follows Jesus along his journey to the cross – paying attention to what that journey costs Jesus, and what it costs us, as Jesus’s followers.

Before I read today’s passage, please go to God with me in prayer and then be centered by our choir. Let us pray:

We are in such a hurry, God. To move through our days, to check off our lists, to make quick judgements, to draw conclusions. By your Holy Spirit – as we encounter now your word in Scripture, help slow us down so that you might speak...and we might listen...and...if we can get out of our own way...so that we might understand. We ask it in Jesus’s name. Amen.

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Do you think that God gives people what they deserve?

Do you think that God business is of punishing people for their sins?

Do you think that natural disasters and accidents...maybe aren’t accidents? But the result of some kind of bad behavior?

It might not be you, but there are plenty of people who do think this.

The same was true in Jesus’s time.

I’ll be reading from the gospel of Luke – chapter 13, verses 1-9. Jesus is speaking to a group of people who harbored some of those thoughts and questions I just asked.

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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.” ’

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Many of you know that my younger sister is also a Presbyterian pastor.

If you’ve met my sister, you also know why I am exceedingly glad that I am her older brother. Growing up would have been pretty tough if I had to follow in her footsteps.

Presently, Meg and her husband Jarrett are co-pastors in Chapel Hill. (Yes, there is a lot of specialized pastoral care that goes on in Chapel Hill when the men’s basketball team has the kind of year like this one...) Before that, though, they were co-pastors in the Washington DC area.

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One of the perks...or hazards...of that job was that they had people in their congregation who worked in various branches of government. In fact, the Parliamentarian of the US congress was a member of their church – and one day, he invited his pastor Meg to give the opening invocation from the dais of the House of Representatives.

After being gavelled back into session, Meg began to pray:

O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, in you we live and move and have our being.

Amid these public servants, gathered to govern as they swore to do, we invoke your presence, O God, greater than we can ever grasp, and as near as the intake of our own breath.

Not a bad start, I would say. Good reference to a familiar hymn; a well-loved verse of Scripture...and getting straight to the point of asking for God to be present.

And then, after a little bit more of the prayer, Meg said words that I am not sure have been used in the halls of congress before...

Ignite our integrity...she continued to pray...
...and right-size us in our britches.

She’s always had a lot of guts, I’ll tell you that. And a lot of sass.
But I think my sister prayed for something important that day.

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It might be a little hard to recognize – because we get dropped right smack dab in the middle of a scene – but in the first part of today’s Scripture, Jesus is right-sizing the britches of the people who heard him speak.

Evidently, what Jesus encountered was a group of people who were just sure that those who were affected by these two tragedies: (1) those Galileans who were victims to Pontus Pilate’s violence as a show of force, and (2) those residents of Jerusalem who perished when a tower of Siloam fell...in both of these cases, the people who Jesus encountered seemed to be blaming the victims by suggesting that somehow they deserved it because of their behavior, or their sin.

“Do you think those Galileans were any worse sinners than other residents of Galilee?”

“Do you think those who perished by the tower were any worse sinners than others living in Jerusalem?”

(He asked this to those who probably were a mixture of both – Galileans and those living in Jerusalem...)

“No, I tell you – but unless YOU repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Mmmhmm. I bet those people’s britches fit a little differently after Jesus dropped the mic.

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And then...because the point of Jesus’s ministry wasn’t to shame people...Jesus told those same people a parable to help them re-frame their assumptions about God.

That’s what parables do, you know.

We’re going to have a summer sermon series on parables, so you’ll probably hear one of your preachers say this again in a few months – but Jesus tells parables for something more than just illustrating a point...Jesus tells parables to help reveal something as true that often gets missed or confused.

In the case of today’s Scripture – what the parable reveals is something about the nature of God.

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My guess is that you may remember a couple of familiar parables that Jesus tells about a landowner. There was the parable about the landowner who gave each of the workers a “talent” to invest. Remember that one? Or the parable about the landowner who invited people throughout the day to work in the vineyard. Remember that one?

Well...those parables were in Matthew’s gospel. Today’s parable shows up in Luke, and it is bit different. There is a landowner – he had fig tree planted in his garden and then came back expecting it to have born fruit.

But there’s another character, too.

Do you remember where the story of being human started? With Adam and Eve in the garden. Do you remember where God encountered Adam and Eve? Walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. Fast-forward to Jesus’s time – do you remember where Jesus was buried? In a garden tomb. And do you remember – on that first Easter morning – who Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus to be after she saw the stone rolled away and the tomb empty? The gardener.

In the parable that Jesus tells, the landowner wants action. He expected the tree to produce – it didn’t – and that’s the end of it. Cut and dry. Black and white. Fig trees exist to produce fruit, and if they don’t, then what is the point? The landowner is ready to move on. He summons the gardener to voice his disapproval. “See here!” (My guess is the gardener had seen it...) “I’ve waited three years for this tree to produce fruit! Cut it down. It’s wasting the soil that I own.”

The gardener is the one who urges patience. “Let me tend to it. Let’s fertilize it. Let’s give it another year. Sometimes trees just need a little more time.”

My friend and colleague, Joe Clifford (pastor down the road at Myers Park Presbyterian Church) notes that beyond exercising patience, the gardener does something else, too. Joe calls this character “the Gutsy Gardener.” Did you catch what the gardener said to the landowner at the end of the parable? After urging him to give the fig tree more time, he said “If it bears fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down.”

In other words, “cut down your own dadgum tree.”

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Jesus ends his parable without imagining what the landowner might say – but for those in the crowd that heard it, they knew that the hired help doesn’t usually tell the boss to roll up their sleeves and do the dirty work for them.

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I think we all might know something about living in a culture that puts a high value on us to produce – maybe even something about drawing a straight line between our sense of self and self-worth to what it is we do...and how well we do it.

The message – whether conscious or subconscious – is that that’s why we exist. And that if we don’t produce what is expected...whether those are our own expectations, or the expectations of others...then we are taking up space...we are worth-less...we are expendable. It’s a hard, cold, exacting logic.

It takes a strong constitution to push back against that culture.

To see it as dehumanizing. To imagine, instead, that we might exist for another purpose.

I think some of us might know something about building a scaffolding for our faith that assumes that God rewards us for what we do – for how we act – for how much we know – for how many people we help.

The message – whether conscious or subconscious – is that that’s why we exist. And that while we can feel self-righteous when things are going well – because we’ve obviously done the work and made the choices that have earned us God’s favor – we (and everyone else) are just one misstep away from experiencing the wrath of God’s vengeance.

It takes a strong constitution to push back against that version of God.

To see in that version that God is limited. To imagine, instead, that God’s love and grace for us might outpace our expectations.

I think others of us might know something about feeling marooned from God because of the shame we feel about some of our choices. To think that because of what we’ve done, then the verdict is rendered. The die is cast.

The message – whether conscious or subconscious – is that there isn’t a reason for us to exist. That the choices we’ve made have defined us once and forever. That once we’ve violated God’s expectations then we are in a territory without access to grace.

It takes a strong constitution to push back against that version of God.

To see in that version that God is limited. To imagine, instead, that God’s love and grace for us might outpace our expectations.

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In the face of a crowd of self-righteous people. Who both liked believing in – and were probably afraid – of a God of vengeance. Who were also – some of them – likely secretly insecure about their own choices. And who were living in a culture laden with expectation...in the face of that crowd Jesus reminded of two things:

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That they were human, and as broken as everyone else – no matter what they had convinced themselves of otherwise.

And that like the gardener, God is patient, and generous, and tender, and counter-cultural, and unwilling to give into the pressure that assigns worth to production...but is more than willing to take the time to till the soil, to let things take root, to fertilize the ground until transformation can occur.

There is a cost to believing in a God like that. There’s a cost to joining the work of that kind of God in the world. It’s not always popular...because people get impatient – and things like grace and patience can easily be dismissed as weakness.

For Jesus, it was the cost that his love for us required.

And for those of us who follow Jesus, it’s a decision we have find the guts to make, too.

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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.