

WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.17.2019



The Gardener

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Luke 10: 25-37

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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This Lent we are following Jesus through the gospel of Luke. We started this journey on Ash Wednesday when Jesus “turned his face toward Jerusalem” – which is the way Luke’s gospel describes the moment when Jesus began his journey toward his crucifixion on the cross. Along this journey we will learn to appreciate the depth of Jesus’ love and learn part of what it means to follow him as disciples. Today’s Scripture is from the 13th chapter of Luke’s gospel. I am beginning to read in the first verse. Listen with me for the word of God.



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It's dangerous to come in on the middle of a conversation.

How many times have you walked into a room and heard someone mid-sentence and made an assumption about the nature of what you heard that turned out to be completely misplaced? At the very least, that can be awkward. At the worst, those assumptions can have long-lasting damage that is difficult to undo.

This is kind of obvious, but most Sundays when we read a few verses from Scripture, we are dropping in on the middle of a conversation. So one of the things that is always important is to pay attention to the broader context before we make assumptions about the things we hear people say.

In today's passage, if we aren't careful, we might assume that Jesus was a fire and brimstone preacher. Someone with the strategy of a street corner ministry where the intent to scare people into salvation.

“Repent!” Jesus says. “Because if you don't, you will perish!”

Actually, it's even a little more scary: “Repent, because if you don't you will perish in the same dramatic and tragic ways as those who suffered at the hands of Pilate or under the rubble of the tower of Siloam.”

Does that sound like the Jesus that you know?

Like the Jesus we meet in the rest of the gospels?

The answer is no – and as Presbyterians who stand in the Reformed tradition – one of the things that tradition teaches us is that we always read Scripture in the light of other Scripture – and when you look at the way Jesus lived and loved and healed and taught in other places in the Scripture – what we read in today's passage sounds out of character.

In the conversation we dropped in on today, Jesus seems to be reacting to the prevailing wisdom he hears coming from the crowd.

We hear mention of two tragedies. One is a reference to an act of terror by Pontus Pilate who mercilessly slayed innocent Galilean pilgrims on the way to the Temple. The other is a reference to an accident where the tower of Siloam collapsed and killed 18 people in Jerusalem. In both instances, the crowd assumes that those who perished must have gotten what they deserved. That,



somehow, their fate was the consequence of their sin. That their tragedy was, somehow, God's punishment.

We've heard those arguments before.

Not long after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Rev. John Haggie took to the airwaves to explain that the reason for such tragedy could be found in the city's embrace of a sinful lifestyle and a wayward morality.

In 2010, after 100,000 people died in Haiti due to a 7.0 magnitude earthquake, Pat Robertson was quick to say that the presence of voo-doo in the Haitian culture caused God to render destruction.

We're just days after the shock of another tragedy in Christchurch, New Zealand where white-supremacists attacked a mosque at prayer. I can't help but wonder how long it will take for someone to explain that this is God's judgment on Islam.

God's people have a long history of explaining away a tragedy by blaming victims and assuming God's vengeance. Perhaps it is easier to have an answer in the face of things we don't understand.

Jesus wasn't having it.

I think the reason Jesus sounds so out of character in the first part of today's passage is because he needed to get the crowd's attention – and ours – by brushing them back from their misunderstanding of God as one who punishes sin by allowing for, or causing tragedy. And once Jesus has our attention, he tells a parable to hold up a different vision.

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This week and next, we are going to focus on parables that Jesus tells on his way toward the cross in Jerusalem. The reason Jesus tells parables, according to biblical scholar CH Dodd, isn't really to illustrate a point, but to reveal something about the nature and character of God and God's kingdom.

Within earshot of the crowd who assumes that God punishes people for their sins, the parable that Jesus tells is about a fig tree. You can imagine how easy it would be for the crowd to draw the conclusions that Jesus is telling a story about the landowner as a stand-in for God who comes expecting fruit from the tree,



expecting production, and – seeing none – pronounces judgement by ordering the tree to be cut down. This would match the version of the God the crowds believed in – a God who does not tolerate sin. A God who does not put up with excuses. A God whose judgment is swift and stern and exacting.

But Jesus’ parables are never that simple.

The character of the landowner is a usual suspect in Jesus’ parables. And while in some cases, the landowner is a stand-in for God, as a friend of mine in ministry notices, in Luke’s gospel, landowners are not usually the favored characters. You may remember the parable about a rich landowner who, after a bumper crop, tore down his old barns and built bigger barns. Jesus uses him as a negative example of what it looks like to store up treasures for ourselves instead of being rich toward God. Additionally, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a rich landowner who ignores the poor man Lazarus lying at his gate. That landowner ends up in torment, while Lazarus enjoys the company of Abraham.

In this parable, Jesus introduces a new character: the gardener. Gardeners show up in other places in the Bible, too. The Bible begins with an image of God as a gardener in Eden. After his resurrection, Mary mistakes Jesus as a gardener outside the empty tomb. In the story Jesus tells, the gardener acts as the landowner’s foil. Instead of following orders – as would be the custom – the gardener takes up the cause of the fig tree: “let me tend to it. Let me till the soil. Let me fertilize it. Give it a year. See what happens.”

And then, in an act my friend and colleague Joe Clifford calls especially gutsy, the gardener shows a bit of defiance in the face of the landowner, “if it bears fruit in a year, well and good. But if it doesn’t – you can it down.”

“Cut down your own tree,” the gardener says.

Because the gardener isn’t in the business of cutting trees down. The gardener is in the business of helping trees grow – nurturing them, watering them, tilling the soil, offering patience, pruning so new leaves can sprout. That’s the gardener’s role.

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I wonder how many of us carry around an image of a God who possesses the



characteristics of that landowner: ready to pronounce judgment, giving people what they deserve – especially if they fail to bear the fruit that is expected, focused on production, evaluating worth by what a person contributes to the cause? I fear it is more than I would expect.

I don't know all the reasons why Thomas chose to come to a Presbyterian seminary, but we found ourselves as classmates for three years. In a graduate program with graduating classes of 55 people, you get to know your fellow students well. Thomas grew up in the south and in a family that thought about God like that landowner from Jesus' parable: stern, exacting, giving people what they deserved. From birth, his faith was formed by attending a church that was clear that God was about the business of judgment and that the Christian life was about living a certain way in order to avoid the judgment that would befall you if you fell out of line.

Thomas went to a faith-based college in central Virginia that reinforced this same version of God, and he spent a few years after college teaching and working in youth ministry where his primary goal was to protect teenagers from the vengeance of God that would come if they let their sinful thoughts get the best of them. He was charismatic, and sure of himself, and smart, and creative...and he knew a lot about the Bible.

Thomas and I became friends – we studied together, traveled together, worshipped together; we talked a lot about the ministry we would share and what God needed with the church and its leaders.

I think it was Thomas' love of Scripture that began to challenge the version of God he had come to know from his childhood. Thomas took all the Bible classes he could – he learned Greek and Hebrew. He was a teacher's assistant in both. He spent endless office-hours in the studies of our Bible professors – women and men who had committed their lives to plumb the depths of God's word, and whose insights began to push Thomas to reconsider the character of the God who was at the heart of the gospel.

One spring day in our second year of the program, it all came crashing down. I remember standing outside with Thomas in the quad of the seminary just after an Old Testament class. He was distraught...in tears. "I don't believe in the God



that I used to,” he told me. “I think God is bigger than that, and more full of grace.” “But I don’t know enough about the God that I want to believe in, and that scares me because how can I trust my life to something I don’t fully understand?”

I learned a lot about faith in seminary, but one of my most powerful lessons came in the quad on that spring afternoon. It turns out, what Thomas needed was space and time. Space and time to rediscover a God whose primary posture is grace; who welcomes questions and curiosities about those things that are difficult to understand; who doesn’t give up on us...on any of us...in spite of the ways we fall short. That is Thomas’ ministry now – as the pastoral leader of a creative community of faith in Ohio.

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As a people who live in a culture of production and expectation and demand – where what we are is what we do – and where we base our worth on things like “outcomes” and “deliverables” – I wonder how much that impacts how we understand the character of God.

On his way toward Jerusalem, Jesus holds up a different vision: of a God who is gracious, patient, and nurturing...intent on giving us space and time...in order that all of us have the opportunity to do what we were created to do: bear fruit for the kingdom.

The crowds who first heard Jesus tell this parable about a gardener and a fig tree didn’t know it yet, but a few weeks later, Jesus would demonstrate the true character of God when he gave himself up to be crucified. Indeed, there is perhaps no greater window into the heart of God than by what we see on the cross – which shows that far from being focused on vengeance and giving people what they deserve, the God who claims us is, instead, committed to doing whatever is necessary to allow us to grow.

To that God be all praise and wonder and glory, this day and forevermore.
Amen.

