

“Truth and Light Appear”
April 3, 2022

Isaiah 55:1-9
Luke 13:1-9

We’ve been using the Percy Dearmer hymn “Now Quit Your Care” to help guide us through Lent this year, giving special attention to those words at the end of the first verse: “Reply with love to love most high.”

The second verse of that hymn reminds us that the goal of Lent is neither grief nor bowing in sackcloth and ashes. Rather, these days of Lent invite us “to be led to where God’s glory flashes” and to come near to God’s beauty.

“Make clear,” the hymn urges. “Make clear where truth and light appear.”

While Dearmer was an Anglican, he uses a phrase that has special resonance for us in the Congregational tradition of the United Church of Christ. We remember John Robinson telling the Pilgrims before they left for the New World: “The Lord hath more truth and light to break forth from his holy Word.”

As those who wait for the light, we pay close attention to scripture because it is always shining upon our lives in new ways. Sometimes that light can seem harsh, leaving us uncertain and upset instead of comfortable and calm. Anxious fear and worry return.

So it is when Jesus tells that story about the fig tree. It’s short and to the point. And the point is sharp as a knife.

As with the other parables that Jesus told, this one is rooted in everyday life. Vineyards were plentiful in ancient Israel and were often planted with fig trees growing among the vines. There was nothing unusual about someone planting in this way.

The problem with fig trees, however, is that they absorb an especially large amount of nourishment from the soil. They begin to rob the vines of sustenance over time. Of course, this isn’t a major problem as long as the tree bears fruit.

Now, this particular fig tree had been there for about six years, growing in the sun, drawing nourishment from the soil, putting out leaves—but producing no fruit. No one expected the tree to bear fruit for the first three years after it was planted. But three more years passed—and still no figs!

The natural response would be: “Cut it down!” It’s one thing for a tree to take up the nutrients if it is bearing fruit; it’s something else altogether when you don’t get one fig for all those years. “Cut it down!”

Harsh words—even if they make good sense.

And yet we hear something more, something filled with grace.

The gardener replies to the demand to cut down the tree with a request: leave the tree alone for one more year. Let me dig around it, loosening the soil, providing more nourishment to the roots. Then we’ll see if next year it produces fruit.

Those words exhibit a sense of mercy that we desire in our lives and in our world.

What student is not relieved when his request for more time to finish a paper is granted?

Who of us does not rejoice when she learns that the report due on Friday won't be needed until Monday?

We would like to receive mercy and show mercy. We would like to receive grace and give grace.

Then just as we begin to breathe a sigh of relief, Jesus ends the parable with the gardener agreeing—then adding “If it still doesn't produce fruit, you can cut it down.”

You can cut it down.

That is to say, the paper better be finished within a week; the report better be in the office on Monday morning. Or else...

Cut it down.

If we were telling this parable, we could do better, couldn't we?

I think most of us could be far more understanding than Jesus. We might recognize that the tree bore no fruit because times were tough everywhere. We might not want to put the tree under any extra stress by demanding fruit at all, so if it doesn't produce any fruit after another year, well, that's OK.

Cut it down? No—cut it some slack.

Our ending provides some comfort, doesn't it? It says we have all the time in the world. We have all the time in the world for our lives to be productive, fruitful. We have all the time in the world to love our neighbors. We have all the time in the world to deal with the poverty and the homelessness and the racial tensions in our nation. And if we bear no fruit, there are plenty of excuses.

So relax. Take it easy.

And yet, when we listen carefully to Jesus, somewhere in our souls we hear not just harshness, but life-giving strength and hope in that troubling parable.

We don't have all the time in the world. We each have only 24 hours in a day. And no one has any way of knowing when those days will end.

Can we hear this parable with our hands folded in comfort?

Can we hear this parable without examining our own lives?

Only if we're still convinced that time will wait for us.

The ending that Jesus gives this story is harsher than the ending we might create. But at the same time, it offers more grace than we might expect—and more than we would offer..

By telling of a “deadline” Jesus doesn't string his followers along. We don't hear: “Everything's all right. Keep on as unhappy, as unproductive as you are. It doesn't matter.”

You see, it does matter. And somewhere deep inside maybe that's the truth that you have been waiting to hear.

God desires that our lives bear fruit—things like love, joy, peace.

The tree is given one more year—a year of forgiveness, restoration, and second chances.

What we do, how we act, does matter. Each day we are given the choice—to tear down or build up, to complain or to encourage, to welcome or to turn away. The choices we make, the actions we take will determine whether or not our lives bear fruit.

The lesson of the fig tree is a challenge to live each day, each year as a gift from God.

And yes, let us never forget that God is patient, forgiving, understanding. But God's mercy stands out more clearly when seen in relief against God's judgment. The announcement of judgment “Cut it down!” can also be an invitation to turn in a new direction, an offer to renew your life, to restore your soul.

Maybe now we can better understand the way that Jesus responds to the report of tragedies that came to him.

There are no records of these events outside of Luke's gospel. Lost in the distant past are two examples of evil in the world.

One is human—Galileans slain by Pilate as they came to offer sacrifices to God. Why did this happen to *them*?

One is a natural disaster—the residents of Jerusalem killed when a tower collapsed and fell on them. Why did this happen to *them*?

There is a comforting lie that tells us: “You *are* better than they are.” You are better than those who were killed in an earthquake. You are better than those dying from addiction. The lie tells us “These people were worse sinners than you.”

It's a nice idea. Bad things happen to bad people. I'm good because I'm a Christian, or an American, or well-off, or well-educated. And because I'm good, I'm protected. It's a comforting thought. But it's a lie.

Jesus turns all this on its head.

Instead of a safe discussion of the sins of other people, of *them*, Jesus turns the focus on us.

“Do you think,” Jesus asks, “that they were worse sinners?”

As we get ready to answer he continues: “No, but unless you repent, you will all perish, just as they did.”

The axe is poised at the trunk of the tree, even as we stand around pointing at others.

Again, the truth is harsh. But it carries the grace of God.

What if Jesus told us what we'd like to hear, what we so often think? “Yes, those people were worse sinners.”

We would feel good for a while. We would breathe a sigh of relief. We would have a faith that recognized our nationality, our virtue, our intelligence, our income, our cleverness.

But before long, we would begin to wonder: How soon before I slip? How long until I too am crushed by some tower? When will the flood waters come? What will happen when I become unworthy of the love of God that has protected me so far?

By saying we're all in the same situation, Jesus also offers a way through. God is the judge of our very being. And God offers all of us the opportunity for repentance. You and I are given the chance to turn around, to walk a new path.

The real issue here is not the sin of others. The real issue here is not the suffering of others. The real issue is the obligation that each of us has to live in trust before God.

As with the story of fig tree, here too Jesus brings the good news that there is still time to turn around. There is still time for productive living. God's mercy is always in conversation with God's judgment.

If we are satisfied with self-righteousness and our good works, we are not ready for the forgiveness that God offers. Forgiveness is for those who know the harsh reality of sin, of evil, of fruitlessness—in the world and more immediately, in our own lives.

The realization that we too need to repent, to turn around, to turn toward God once more can come as an unwelcome shock.

But recognition of the wrong that we do, the sin in which we live, loosens up and nourishes the soil around us, it allows us to continue living so that our lives might bear fruit.

When the harsh truth of God's judgment shines in our lives, we can better see the mercy of God that we seek in this season of Lent.

Slowly—in our lives and in our world—truth and light appear.

Let us reply with love to love most high.