

“No Better Time Than Now” based on Luke 13:1-9 and Isaiah 55

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 20, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

As we explore the meaning of today’s readings of scripture on this first day of spring, I want you to imagine yourself out on a patio somewhere in the warm sunlight. A mild breeze brings the smell of fresh flowers and new growth of the season. You have your morning coffee, or whatever it is you enjoy at this time. Imagine you’re sharing the moment with a few close friends, when you get a visitor. It’s Jesus, and you can ask him anything. How would you even start the conversation? What would you ask? What might a friend ask? Would you go first? If so, what is your first question? Sit with that thought for a moment.

Now let’s modify the scene – you’re not with a few friends on a small patio somewhere, but you are part of a growing crowd of thousands pushing forward to listen to Jesus. And yet, you still feel close, near enough that he can hear you ask a question. So many people and yet, when someone spoke of an inheritance squabble, Jesus heard, responded, and pivoted his teaching based on it.

No, you are not on the patio, but walking toward Jerusalem, yet it feels intimate. It’s so intimate, that even Peter is taken aback by the feeling of this moment. He asks Jesus if one of the teachings was meant for him and the disciples, or if it was meant for everyone in the massive throng following them. As you walk with them for miles, one thing becomes clear: This scene is very different. Very unusual. Unique. Your walk is among thousands, but you feel close, like you’re on that patio – like it’s just you, Jesus, and some friends.

I have asked you to do this because I think it is valuable to locate yourself in scripture, especially for passages like the one we read today in the gospel of Luke. Luke sets this passage of what seems like an intimate conversation with Jesus, in the midst of a series of teachings given by Jesus as he wanders, traveling from the sea of Galilee and heading toward Jerusalem. And I want you to imagine what it would be like to be there, as a massive crowd swells up behind Jesus, yet, you still able to have a conversation.

In the verses before our reading, Jesus is critical of those who can predict trivial things, but who cannot see the consequences of their own actions in the moment they are in. He talks of how some predict weather by reading the signs around them, yet, fail to recognize that our desire for judgement, especially the judgement of others, is an ‘all or nothing’ proposition. We go to trial hoping for our victory in court over our enemies, but that victory could just as well be decided against us. Instead, Jesus advises to do your best to settle the matter, before it gets to the judge, to be reconciled.

This is the context from which someone like you in this story like you on a patio tells Jesus a story. They tell him about the time Pilate killed some of fellow Galileans in Jerusalem. They tell Jesus how they were standing up against idolatry, against the Romans, against Pilate who wanted to put Caesar’s image in the temple mount. They tell how Pilate’s soldiers pretended to be supporters and friends, only to infiltrate the protest and murder their friends. Their blood spilled on the floor of the temple, dripping down to where the sacrifices are made. This is not

just a story they tell Jesus, but one which has been recorded in the annals of history by the historian Josephus.

And then they tell of a lesser-known incident, in which a tower collapsed, killing 18 people. They want to know why God would judge these Galileans who went to the temple to fight for what was right, only to be murdered by the Roman authorities? They want to know why the tower killed those seemingly innocent people? They want to know what they all might have done to deserve this? How could this have happened? Where is God? Did God allow this? Or worse, did God cause this?

Jesus's response, for those of us who want a direct answer, is not particularly satisfying. For those of us who want to know exactly God's reasoning for allowing or causing this, Jesus is not going to scratch that itch for us – but instead he makes us think. Jesus offers a parable, a metaphor for the circumstances to guide us. He tells of a plant, a fig tree in a vineyard that bears no fruit, so, its owner has every right to have it dug up and destroyed. But the gardener steps in, advocates for the fig tree, to give it another opportunity to bear fruit.

So, if we are to think, then let us consider first the promise we discussed last week to Abraham. Abraham's descendants were to be a light to all nations, so all might know the Lord. This is God's promise, but Israel, the nation called by God to do just this task, has not yet succeeded. Israel has not tended to the tree, and the tree is barren. And so, the gardener, who speaks to the owner as an equal, takes on Israel's task, to put off true justice and instead show mercy. It is just and right to cut down a tree that is fruitless, but it is merciful and loving to tend to it again.

Jesus is for us the gardener. He is the one called to cultivate the soil and bring fruit from it. This was Israel's calling first, yet it is the Son of God who fulfills that calling within creation, to be on Israel's behalf, the one charged both with destroying what's unfruitful and the one charged to bring fruit and new life where none is found. Christ is the mediator – fully God and fully human – to restore us. And so, in his life and death and resurrection, we are united, all of us in Israel's purpose, and also in the God of Israel's purpose, to bear fruit as the Lord intended.

The passage talks of one year, but this is not a time limit per se, but language of a second chance, a language of new opportunity. God in Christ does not give up on us, but redeems us. No, it's not because God's existence would depend on a creation, but because God is keeping the promise to Abram, the promise to Israel, and the many mercies promised to David, as referenced in Isaiah. This is the promise that calls us to share in this work, serving the ministry of reconciliation.

This ministry comes to us because God came down to share in our humanity in Jesus. The Son of God bore our sin, became our flesh, fully within our limits to live as we live, and his journey to Jerusalem was to face the powers of sin and death for us. These are the powers personified by the powers of Rome and religious authorities. Indeed, the Son died on that cross for us, in a punishment for rebels, and rose from the dead for us, a reward for the faithful. He shared in our life, so that we might share in his, making us righteous for his Spirit to dwell in and among

us, so that we might be ministers with him, reconciling all things through him, as gardeners like him.

Jesus rejects the idea that it was the sins of the Galileans or the sins of those killed by the tower, which resulted in their deaths, not by saying it is random, but by exposing all of our sins. He says we must all repent, and that word in Greek means to have our minds transformed and in Hebrew means to turn around. We must all turn to God, to be changed by God, to be reformed by God from death to life. It is not that these people deserved this in and of themselves, but that God is holding back all that is truly deserved and calling us to join in cultivating something better.

So, now I want to bring us back to our backyard patios, with our friends and the nice breeze, and consider again what we might ask Jesus about – the things we lament in this world. Might we wonder, where is God when oppressive governments attack people? But perhaps, instead of Pilate, we ask about the actions of Putin in Ukraine, or instead of Rome's military, we ask about the extrajudicial killings in our streets? These are questions like those put to Jesus in this passage.

Might we wonder too, where is God when tragedy strikes, but instead of the Tower of Siloam fell, perhaps we ask about that 12-story condo that was neglected and collapsed in Miami last year, or we ask about the profitable choice to neglect in correcting malfunctions that caused several planes to crash? These too are questions like those put to Jesus in today's passage.

The parable of the fig tree tells us that the consequences of sin would and should be far worse, if it were not for God's promises. But it also tells us that we are not helpless in these circumstances. We are called not to look on in horror, but to be part of the solution right now, to share in the gardener's work and bear fruit for a new vision.

What is that vision? That's where Isaiah 55 comes in. This fruit is the kingdom where those without money, without price, can buy wine and milk, which come from the generous love of God that pursues us and they are not earned. They are received from God to flow through us as we share in the gardener's work. Remember, God's ways are not like ours. This is not an economy that works in our minds.

It's an idea we struggle with if we think that our value is in meeting the accomplishments this world says give us value, and then we judge ourselves and others by whether they accomplish or do not accomplish these same things. However, if we see that our value comes from a generous God who gives without price, then we see God's higher ways, the higher paths, and we set aside our judgement of others. We set aside our desire for victory over others and instead discern what is good, what is pure and what is given freely – that is grace.

This is the grace of our Lord Jesus who pursues us in love. This is the grace if a God humble enough to share in our weakness to cultivate something better by dying in our place on the Roman cross. God shared in our suffering so we might share in God's life, to be made temples of God's spirit to pour out God's love in this world. Isaiah says that God's word goes out, to

accomplish its purposes. And God's word has done just that, to do what Israel could not do, to do what you and I cannot do, and it give us the righteousness of that accomplishment. This is not so we can sit back and say, 'Ah, I've got my ticket to heaven,' but so that we can share in God's work in response, empowered by God's life.

God in the gardener advocates for us so that we might be gardeners filled with God's Spirit, which is called our advocate, so that we might turn to God and might repent. This is so we might accept our role in advocating for others, so that they too might join us in knowing God's love and doing this work and garden with us. As Christ shared in our life to cultivate what was fruitless and bring fruit and new creation, so we are called to do join his work.

The fact of the matter is that sin is real – it is in us, and it is in the institutions of this world. Sin is our turning away from God and giving priority to the things of this world, even things which can be good – family, country, religion. But if we worship them, they are idols worshiped instead of the God who gave these things to us as good and precious gifts.

When the tree does not bear fruit – when we see the sins of humanity on full display, whether in the Russian invasion of Ukraine or in our own nation's structural flaws. What better time than now is there to heed the warning of Jesus and repent, turn to God and be a part of the solution, the ministry of reconciliation, by praying and serving to do what we can to make the tree bear fruit and make this world a better place.

All of this starts with loving the neighbor that is in front of us and reaching out to the neighbor who needs us most. Then seeking ways to repair the breach in our world. What better time than now to repent and rejoice, because we are joining the life of the Kingdom of God, which is at hand in us. Amen.