**SERMON Luke 13:1-9 (Good Enough 3)**

INTRODUCTION

Our current time is not lacking in crises, breaking news, conflicting and confusing news reports. It is normal to lament the regressive policies and laws that seem to undo the progress that previous decades have made. It is easy to feel overwhelmed and disheartened. But this linear view of time and progress is not the only perspective on development or betterment. In fact, while many people in the modern era seem to agree that time is linear, for most of humankind’s existence, time has been considered cyclical and rhythmic. Like the turning of the seasons or the repeating and evolving church liturgical calendar. It is this cyclical, seasonal concept of time that gives me comfort today. It is a reminder that times of regression are not permanent, but will give way to progress, that times of fear and anger do not last, but will subside and allow joy and hope to emerge. Winter doesn’t last forever; the trees and the ground do not stay bare but flourish and fruit in their time. We too, as human beings, could benefit from understanding our own well-being, our energy, our fruitfulness, or productivity in a cyclical fashion, rather than a linear one. Doing so helps us appreciate the impermanence of states of suffering, sickness, and oppression; seasons of activity, busyness and productivity, must also give way to rest, compassion for self and others.

TEXT (v1-5)

Today, our short parable is about an unproductive fig tree, and it is preceded by 5 disturbing and seemly unrelated verses. In them we hear of two newsworthy calamities, two tragedies –one reported by the audience and the other by Jesus himself. This audience has gathered around Jesus, and they are attempting to process how these current events might impact their lives, and the way they practice their faith in a broken world, where a tyrannical governor has just massacred folks from their area. Their heads were likely swimming with questions: *Why did this awful thing happen? Whose fault, was it? Was it an act of divine judgement? Was the suffering of the victims the result of their sin?* And, *how might they avoid the same fate? Maybe they needed to spend more time in prayer, or attend worship more, or serve others and donate more of their belongings.*

Then Jesus, as he so often does, recognizes that what was exacerbating their fear, was the moral assumptions they were making about these deaths, about the tragedy that had just occurred. In similar but different ways, ancient and modern belief systems around suffering and death are often tied to explicit or implicit assumptions about fault. Victim blaming, that is, focus on an individual with no regard to the systems that shape those individual lives –and the desire for a tidy, linear cause-and-effect, explanation that can make sense of a scary and chaotic situation, assuming we have control of all things through our choices– all feed into how we interpret death, destruction, suffering and all kinds of bad things that happen in this world. And Jesus makes this point: those who died in these tragic ways are no more sinful than those who didn’t. And, those who are still alive, cannot assume it is as simple as their being less sinful.

LINK TO THE PARABLE

You have heard it multiple times already this Lent. Our lives are short, our bodies are vulnerable –to violence, to illness, to physical/cultural/emotional/mental limitations, and to chance accidents that kill. These things are true of all of us, regardless of how we choose to live. But that doesn’t mean that how we choose to live doesn’t matter, and to illustrate this Jesus tells a parable that highlights an appreciate for the cyclical nature of time, progress, and productivity. A perspective that may help us, shore up our energies and strength for the coming days.

TEXT (v6-9)

This story is about a fig tree that hasn’t been producing fruit (for 3 years). The owner is annoyed and ready to chop down this ‘waste-of-space’ tree (v7). But the gardener advocates for extending just a bit more grace, patience, and some more advanced agricultural techniques. He says, “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,” (v8-9).

We do not know why the fig tree is not bearing fruit. The text doesn’t say it’s incapable, it only says it isn’t happening and hasn’t happened in the past 3 years. A linear view time assumes that if there is no growth, no evidence of productivity, then it must be worthless. But, whose fault is that the tree hasn’t born fruit? Is it the owner of the vineyard? Has he been doing all that needs to be done? Is it the gardener? Has he tended the tree well in the past and will he in the year to come? Is it the soil of the land? Or the tree itself? *Is it a little bit of all those things?* If so, focusing on only one will not be enough to save the tree in this year, even if the gardener does begin to do things right himself and tend to the tree carefully. Nevertheless, the gardener is holding out hope for a shift, for the possibility of flourishing in a new season. He sees reason to believe that there is some latent potential, lurking in the roots of the tree that have been untapped in previous seasons and grants one year of grace.

MAIN POINTS

And here’s where I see the connection between the two parts of our passage today,

The first is a really Lenty one (as Tyler said last week). Life is short, it’s unpredictable, and suffering can come for any of us and can take many different forms. But your suffering is not an indicator of how good or bad you are. The events of your life do not permanently determine your ability to flourish, to experience grow or happiness again. And so, you get to make a choice about what to pour our energies into.

The second is this, in choosing how to spend our one precious life in this broken world of ours, we may need to follow the advice of the gardener. Who said, “Let it alone for one more year.” Friends, if you are feeling at a low ebb this Lent –because of all that life has thrown at you this past couple of years, not to mention the most recent news– may this be permission to pause. Maybe not for a whole year, but at less appreciate that there are seasons for activity and hard work, and seasons for rest. Take time to assess your needs, to extend yourself some extra care and attention. And before you judge yourself too harshly for not being productive enough, efficient enough, fast enough, busy enough, happy enough…all the time, acknowledge the goodness in taking seasons of rest, amidst the work. Work is important, justice work is important particularly these days. But, if we desire to live flourishing lives that bear good fruit, fruit that allows others to flourish too, we must ensure that we are in it for the long-haul…

APPLICATION

So, here are a few ideas gathered from community organizers and folks who have dedicated their lives to justice ministries, that can reduce the detrimental impact of what’s going on in the world and help you meet your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in these chaotic times:

* **Maintain foundational habits of caring for yourself**: drink enough water, eat well, sleep enough, get some physical movement daily.
* **Take the space you need when you need it.** Be intentional with your time: set aside times during your week that are protected. Disengage with social mediawhen you need to. Become comfortable in saying “no**.”**
* **Consume the news mindfully.** Reading the news, especially when it is about tragic events, activates the limbic system of our brain. I learned this week that this is the fear center of our brain that once activated, lushes our body with stress hormones, preparing you to ‘fight-or-flight’. So, while you don’t have to become *un*informed and avoid the news altogether, consuming it mindfully is better for your physical and emotional health in the long run.
* **Develop a healing and grounding rituals.** Learning about the injustices that exist in the world, being on the receiving end of injustice and violence, and reflecting on your own role is all difficult and painful work. At times it can seem bleak and hopeless, which is why it is critical to make sure that you have time and space to engage in healing practices. This looks different for everyone, but can include:
  + Dedicating time each week to hobbies and creative projects.
  + Building gratitude,
  + Engaging in rituals that help ground you so that you feel rooted at times of chaos and uncertainty.
* **Create systems of support.** Think about who is in your community, who can you lean on for support and who do you reach out to for joy. Create systems in your life that will cheer you on and cheer you up.

Eugene Peterson said that discipleship, or the life of faith, is “long obedience in the same direction,” a life-long commitment to justice and love. One that requires seasons of rest, and of grace. You are not a robot after all. So, let me finish with this blessing from Kate Bowler and a reminder to slow down:

CONCLUSION

*A Blessing for Slowing Down*

*Blessed are we* who thought we were self-made by doing,

By accolades, by the accomplishments, and by the gold stars.

We measured our worth by how tired we were every moment,

How many special events we missed because of work,

By how many times we answered “How are you?” with “Busy.”

We thought: *This is the good life.*

But then we grew tired and lonely.

We felt the strain on our relationships and our spiritual lives.

And we became a bit miserable to be around.

So *blessed are we* who stop

–okay, maybe not stop entirely, who are we kidding– but who slow down.

We who discover rest and new life and renewal when we step off the treadmill

(or at least turn it down).

We who remember that the world keeps spinning without us. And thank God for that.

We who remember that we are loved, loved, loved.

Not for what we do, but for who we are.