

“Fig Up”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “A STRANGE PATH TO GLORY”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Luke 13:1-9

¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Do you like old adages or clichés? There are a lot of different ones out there. You know, like, “a stitch in time saves nine.” “A penny saved is a penny earned.” You don’t want to look too close at them because they might not make sense, but they have a wisdom to them. I mean, after all, who cares if you save a penny, really? But they do make a point.

Here’s another one. “Make hay while the sun shines.” Now I understand this one to a degree because I spent a short time working on a ranch as a teenager. That’s right folks, I was an honest to goodness cowboy. I had the boots and everything. I’ll tell you the boot story some other time. But the only thing I remember about that work was

the three days we spent “hayin’.” The short version is they baled the hay on Friday, and it rained all day Saturday and Sunday and then on Monday we went through the fields picking up those bails and throwing them on a trailer. Those bails were supposed to weigh maybe 30 pounds; thanks to the rain they weighed about 80 pounds each. You want to talk about fun? I know what they mean when they say “make hay while the sun is shining.”

These days there is phrase some folks use: “man up.” It means to act like a mature adult male. Stop whining or making excuses and “man up.” This morning I want to suggest that we all need to “fig up.” Let me try to explain what I mean.

There's another saying people use today that is really a cliché: "It was just God's will," or "God has a plan for everything." Usually these are trotted out when someone is suffering. The folks who asked Jesus about the Galileans who Pilate murdered were asking Jesus about this saying. In general they believed, like a lot of us do, that you get what you deserve. They believed when bad things happened you usually deserved it. Of course, they always believed it more when it happened to someone else than when it happened to them.

Barbara Brown Taylor is a pastor and writer. One day when she was working as a hospital chaplain the call came to come sit with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was in surgery. Earlier in the week, the girl had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she could no longer see. At the hospital, a CAT scan confirmed that a large tumor was pressing on the girl's optic nerve, and she was scheduled for surgery as soon as possible.

Barbara found the girl's mother sitting in the waiting room beside an ashtray full of cigarette butts. Her eyebrows were raised in that half-hypnotized stare you get when you are just sitting. Barbara sat down beside her. She came to, and after some small talk she said, "It's my punishment, for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick." Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Then she started

crying so hard that what she said next came out like a siren: 'Now I'm supposed to stop, but I can't stop. I'm going to kill my own child!'

Barbara Brown Taylor said this was hard for her to hear. She decided to try to correct the woman's theology. She said, "I don't believe in a God like that. The God I know wouldn't do something like that." Taylor said the woman's response was not gratitude but confusion. "It messed with the mother's worldview at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to" the alternative. "I may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter's brain tumor, but at the moment she could not: If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to *be* the reason. At least that way she could get a grip on the catastrophe."

Taylor says, "Even those of us who claim to know better react the same way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect in hopes that we can stop causing it. What this tells us is that we are less interested in truth than consequences. What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives.

A theology that says God plans the terrible things that happen solves a lot of problems. "It answers why bad things happen to good people, it punishes the sinner, and everyone else gets a warning, it gives us a God who obeys the laws of

physics: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” But sooner or later that God is inadequate. If we were honest we would admit that a God who works that way is not worthy of our worship, let alone our obedience. I would suggest to you it is the reason a lot of people don’t believe in God because they think that IS how God operates.¹

We are living in strange times. Earthquakes that stop the earth, tsunami watches in Hawaii, hurricanes criss-crossing Florida, and every day 30,000 children die of hunger without any natural disaster. And every day people face personal life-and-death disasters in which they must make decision. Faith is a matter of what you believe is important about life-and-death situations. The reality is everyone has faith in something or someone. The question we must ask ourselves is what we have faith in worth it? Are we basing our lives on a God who is worthy of loving, or are we worshiping a false god who not only doesn’t deserve our faith, but isn’t able to deliver what he/she/it claims it can deliver? That is the question of faith.

The Scripture lesson this morning invites us to consider our faith in the face of disaster, in the face of life-and-death situations. Pilate, governor of Palestine, had killed some Galileans and “mixed their blood with their sacrifices.” Jesus does not affirm them but invites them to question their theology. He asks, “do you think that means they were more evil

than others, more evil than you?” And he even cites another instance of what must have been a well-known disaster. “Do you think those eighteen who were killed when the tower fell on them were worse offenders than all others in Jerusalem?” So Jesus rejects the one plus one equals two theology that if something bad happens we deserved it somehow.

But then Jesus twists the tension up just a bit. He adds, and I have to suspect he was even smiling a bit when he said it, “unless you repent you too will perish.” In fact, he repeats it again just for emphasis. Now folks who love “a+b=c” theology love this kind of stuff because they can throw it in the face of those they think are more evil than them. But Jesus doesn’t leave it at that. He adds a parable about a fig tree.

Most fig tree parables at that time ended badly. Most folks at that time were familiar with those fig tree parables. But Jesus puts a twist on this one. He gives the fig tree more time to put forth figs. Instead of saying it was doomed to be cut down he says the gardener negotiates with the land-owner for more time. What are we to make of this? My sense is Jesus is saying he is less interested in who is to blame as in whether we are focusing on “making hay while the sun is shining.” Instead of letting us off the hook and condemning us he sentences us to one more year, one more try, one more effort at producing what we were destined, designed, intended, created to produce. Figs.

¹ “Life-Giving Fear,” Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, March 4, 1998, page 229, religion-online.org

Most of us just want God to help us feel better about ourselves as we are. Jesus invites us to reconsider, to ask ourselves if we are doing what we were meant to do with our lives, and if not, make a turn. I said it before and I'll say it again. Most of us hear the word repent as a curse, as a judgment, a negative. Instead, we should hear it as opportunity, as possibility, as a gift from God to make our lives more real. To repent is to awaken to the way we may need to make a change in our lives. That change may be minor or it may be radical.

David Kuo wrote about his personal awakening that called for radical change in his book, "Tempting Faith." He says brain tumors and divorces have a way of "clarifying things" in life. Kuo went from political power broker to professional bass fisherman. Kuo is a professional bass fisherman today, but he served in the highest power circles in the nation, as the director of Faith Based initiatives in the White House some years ago. But he came to see that politicians were just using faith and those who mixed their politics with their Christianity for their own benefit. He became convicted that "the corrosive nature of political power, where manipulation, fragile egos, exaggerated self-importance, broken marriages, propagandistic lies, and partisan ideology are the order of the day.... For Kuo, the price was too high; a divorce, disillusionment, remarriage, and surgery for a massive brain tumor at the age of thirty-four provoked a change of direction. So did his realization that the Gospel should subvert political

power, and not vice versa. "I let the passion of politics distract me from what matters most in life," he wrote.²

What matters most in life. That is what faith should help us identify and live for. I think when it comes down to it, Jesus was far more interested in the Kingdom of Heaven here and now than in some far of heavenly kingdom in the bye-and-bye. He was interested in life now and life now means participating in the Kingdom of Heaven now. Repentance is a tool that allows us to turn away from the questions and things that don't matter and get on with what does matter, what we were designed and destined to be and do. That is what should matter most in life.

Just like a fig tree is designed and destined to produce figs, we were and are designed and destined to bring forth, and participate in the Kingdom of Heaven now. That is the place and reality of God's love and justice practiced in all of life now. If we aren't doing that then we need to "fig up." Or, in case you don't get what that means, how about a few other clichés: Get while the getting is good, or strike while the iron is hot, and of course, make hay while the sun shines. Personally, I like the phrase, "fig up." AMEN.

² Dan Clendenin, "Clarifying Moments," journeywithjesus.net, March 11, 2007.