

“Jesus’ Values”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, February 28, 2016
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Holy Scriptures: Luke 13: 1-9; 1 Corinthians 10: 11-13

Luke 13: 1-9

At 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.”

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. 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.’”

1 Corinthians 10: 11-13

¹¹These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ¹²So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your

strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Right around the middle of the Gospel of Luke
is a conversation followed by a parable, a parable of a
fig tree.

Betty and I have fig trees in our backyard that,
despite our efforts, serve primarily to feed fat
squirrels.

Our congregation planted two fig trees, several blueberry
bushes,

Muscatine grape vines, and thorn-less blackberry
bushes

just outside our Chalice Thrift store,
providing fresh summer fruits for any passerby
who approaches the vines and the fig trees.

These fig trees have stories.

Jesus speaks of a different fig tree.

Jesus tells a story that has a twist,

one with a message submerged that is waiting to come
to light...in your soul.

A man waits and waits for a certain fig tree to bear fruit.

Fed up, impatient,

in his frustration and impatience he tells the gardener
to stop wasting fertilizer and care on the tree,
to cut it down and cast it off.

“Why should it be wasting the soil?” he asks.

The gardener responds, *“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.*

If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

In the midst of judgment and hasty decisions,
the gardener sees the value in patience, in grace,
in giving God’s creation a second chance.

These are Jesus’ values.

Please do not be so hasty.

Fertilize, nurture, engage, encourage, feed and water.

Wait, wait and see.

Maybe the emergent change is deeper than you can see from outside.

Mary Bittner writes:

“Sometimes God begins a project that will never come to be.

While we wait, expectant, hopeful, there’s a change in destiny.

Does this mean that God’s uncaring, taking back a parent’s role?

No, our God is loving, healing, holds us, lifts us, makes us whole.”

Unfruitful days and years do not necessarily mean that God is not at work.

Trust that the grace of God is at hand:

divine judgment is real -- yet divine grace always provides a second chance.

These are Jesus’ values.

Which brings us to the reason Jesus told that parable,
and to the passage hidden in plain sight.

Here is a paraphrase of the previous section in Luke’s Gospel.

People want to know if worldwide calamities -- Hurricanes!
Earthquakes! Wars! --

are signs of the end time.
Jesus responds, in effect, *“You haven’t a clue about how to interpret the present time, much less the apocalypse, so please don’t try! Stop wasting your time on who is going to be left behind. Focus instead on what you can do in the here and now to be Kingdom builders.”*

No sooner had Jesus issued this challenge than someone in the crowd stepped forward. *“Now look here, Jesus, don’t say that we can’t read the times. How about that terrible incident, the one where the Galileans were slaughtered and Pilate had their blood mingled with their sacrifices.”*

What part of the Hebrew Scriptures and Law were they missing, ignoring, rejecting?
How about that place where grace and law intersect, interweave, intermingle,
and the Way of God is made clear.
No one gets a pass; everyone is responsible.
We are all our brothers and sisters keepers,
and not just for the ones we pick and choose to keep.
All means all.
Love one another.
Serve, love, minister in your way, in a way that correlates to God’s Way

When it comes to dealing with folks,
Jesus was blessed with the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon.
Jesus deftly changed the subject and direction of the conversation.
He answered,
“No, that is not a sign. And neither are those eighteen

*who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them.
I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”*

He put his emphasis on the here and now,
from possible mortality to practical morality,
from the infinity of life after life to the finitude
of values in the day to day,
from the abstract woulda-coulda to the
reality of worldly concerns.

These are Jesus' values.

Take advantage of the time and energy that you have, here
and now!

He talks about life and living, not death and dying.

He yokes values with repentance.

Repentance has to do with the present, not the afterlife.

This is a values based assumption and theology.

Ever notice how God takes a window and turns it into a
mirror?

“Unless you repent...” -- to repent is to change,
to turn 180 degrees away from harmful behaviors and
toward gracious ones.

If you don't change, have you really repented?

To repent is to turn away from intentional sin and toward
God.

To repent is to turn away from evil and all that separates you
from God and one another and your true self,
and to turn your life toward the source
of all goodness and love.

Jesus tells the crowd and he tells us to stop obsessing on the
lives of other folks,

and to get busy changing the only life you can control
– your own.

What is the fruit Jesus is looking for, anticipating, yearning
to pluck?

A change of heart, a change of choices, a change of behavior
Stop looking out the window; start checking out the mirror.

Two friends on a porch were sitting in rocking chairs sipping
ice tea.

One said, *“That Johnny, he is a mess.”*

The other rocked and then said, *“Johnny is a mess alright,
but Jesus loves him.”*

The first one said, *“Yes, Jesus loves him, but Jesus doesn’t
know him like we do.”*

Repent and confess, believe and trust in a God of grace and
glory,

or else... or else... or else you will perish.

And then what? Is that a sign you want to interpret?

Maybe it would be better to focus on the here and now, on
what you can do and be.

Following the conversation Jesus tells the parable of the fig
tree.

Yes, there will be a day of judgment.

Trees that do not bear fruit are cut down.

Yet the gardener says that there is also room for grace; there
are second chances.

There’s the Holy One like a gardener, offering to feed,
sustain and love you

into new life, new creation, a living hope.

Who did Mary think Jesus was outside the Tomb? *The
Gardener.*

Gardener’s are patient.

Gardeners grow new life, and they celebrate change.

Change takes time, maybe a season or two, or more.

In my home church folks say, “Don’t put a clock on the
Lord.”

There is a lovely, calming sense of patience with God,

and there needs to be one with us as well.
These are Jesus' values.

When it comes down to change, many of us are mystified
about what really matters, what to prioritize,
what to confront, address, and alter in our
lives.

What is God teaching you?

The Apostle Paul said to the people of Corinth,
"These things occurred as examples for us..."
Learning from examples is all about change.
Luke grounds change in Christ.
Paul grounds it in the God's Word, in the Holy Scriptures
and Holy Spirit,
and in our human capacity to learn from our past and
be wiser, better, purer.

Paul wrote to his beloved in the church and community:

⁶ *"Now these things occurred as examples for us,
so that we might not desire evil as they did.*

¹¹ *These things happened to them to serve as an
example,
and they were written down to instruct us,
on whom the ends of the ages have come.*

¹³ *No testing has overtaken you that is not common to
everyone.*

*God is faithful,
and [God] will not let you be tested beyond your strength,
but with the testing [God] will also provide the way out
so that you may be able to endure it."*

What examples got your attention?

Friend of mine lost his grandfather in an auto accident.

He later learned that had Grandpa been wearing his seatbelt he would have lived.

Sadly he wasn't, and very sadly he died.

My friend remembers the example.

So now he puts on his seatbelt, and even insists passengers join him.

He learned his lesson from life.

What lessons in life got your attention?

Which ones have shaped your behavior?

You know what they say: *"Anyone can learn from one's own experience.*

Wise is the person who can learn from another."

What have you learned by observing that has made a difference?

Examples – good, bad or indifferent -- can instruct, warn, prepare and enlighten us.

Scouting manuals, building codes, and professional ethical instructions

all share one thing in common: they are written in blood.

Each guideline, code, and instruction is written with the blood of someone

who got hurt or saved, damaged or helped in the past.

Such codes serve to make a difference in the future.

Must we always wait so late?

Can we hurry up and learn?

Every example before you is there for the plucking,

if you will but take the time and make the energy to learn from it.

These are Jesus' values.

All of us need someone who will hold us accountable;
and someone who will serve as an advocate;
and someone who believes in our omnipotence;
and someone to hold us in their
prayers.

Are you a stern taskmaster? An advocate? Prayer
warrior? Cheerleader?

Which role is the most comfortable for you?

In what areas do you need to grow so that you can add gifts
to your tool bag?

What fruit do you produce, and what's missing?

Where are the gaps?

Clearly not only can we learn from the past, God also learns
from our mistakes.

God is constantly changing things up to get our attention.
God changes tactics, methods, people, even conditions to
help us grow and evolve.

The Spirit helps us learn from our past and other's past,
from examples around us.

My friends, Christ will send you someone.

Someone you trust will tell you the truth.

Christ will be with you when you receive the truth of a
change you need to make.

You know what we say here in the South: "*Love is blind, but
the neighbors aren't.*"

We may have a hard time seeing the truth if we are focused
on everybody else.

Focus on the repentance you need to practice.

Christ will send someone to help you to move through the
change you need to make.

Just like the fig tree, you will be given another chance...or
more, if necessary.

The Gardener will be patient with you, and so will we.

At the same time, be patient with people
who are struggling, wrestling, seeking to cope with
change.

Pray on how you can be their example. Then just do it.

Christ will send someone who will insist that you take
responsibility.

Own the change you need to make.

God and grace will provide a way in and a way out.

Maybe it is easier to take responsibility if you know the way
out.

Dick Hamm is our former General Minister of the Christian
Church.

He tells the story of getting to sit in a real Lunar Module in a
museum.

Now, Dick Hamm is a great big guy and Lunar Modules are
tiny.

As soon as he got in someone slammed the escape hatch
closed.

Dick Hamm suddenly felt trapped and was blinded by his
fear.

Only after the hatch was re-opened, when he saw a way out,
could he appreciate the dials and details inside the
module.

The Good News is that God is already there with you in the
wilderness,

and God will show you the way out,

because first God knows the way in.

In the wilderness God is teaching you to live the questions,
without any expectation of the answer. Just be one
with the questions of life.

These are Jesus' values.

Mary Brittner writes:

“Time will ease the depth of sorrow, though the memory will stay.

Faithful life will see our questions answered in some future way.”

When we can see the way out,
we can then rest better, sleep better, cope and listen better

because we know all will be well, that God will provide a way.

When we trust that God will provide, then we are freer to contemplate

and accept the way in and through whatever we need to address.

The way out is not to escape or deny or abandon, nor is it fight or flight or freeze.

The solution is to go through, to go deep inside, to go together with Christ.

During the Korean War some Korean orphans were crying all night long.

Nurses and doctors and the staff were at their wits end.

“What can we do to help these children sleep?”

A visiting psychiatrist said, *“At bedtime give each child a small piece of bread.*

Let them hold the bread in their hands as they fall asleep.”

So they did, and the children slept peacefully through the night,

knowing that they would have something to sustain them in the morning.

When we know we will be alright on the other side,

when we know that we are assured of a meal, a
Eucharist, a friend, a hug, an ear,
a welcoming gesture, a place in heaven at the
feet of Jesus,
then we feel comforted,
then our faith is stronger, more
confident, more assured
then we can cope with
whatever it is
that we need to
address.

Then we can be the example Christ calls us to be and share.
These are Jesus' values.

One evening a friend was out for a stroll when suddenly she
fell into a deep hole.

She landed okay but could not get out.

A lawyer walking by heard her cries for help and flipped her
his card,

telling her to call him if she ever got out.

A minister walking by heard her cries for help,

and promised her he would inform the Outreach

Committee.

A friend walking by heard her cries for help and jumped into
the hole.

"Jesus Christ, why did you do that?" she asked.

"I don't need company; I need to get out."

Her friend replied, *"I know the way out. I'll show you. Let's
go together, now."*

These are Jesus' values.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!*