

“The Fig in the Vineyard”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Isaiah 55:1-9
Luke 13:1-9

I've *always* been hoping to preach a sermon to you comparing your fate to that of people who are killed by a tyrant or crushed by a falling tower, so when I saw today's scripture, I thought: YES! This is *exactly* what our church people will be thirsty to hear about in Lent!

Okay, that is not entirely true. But luckily we've had friends staying with us for a few days, The Rev. Eily Marlow with her daughter Louise, while Eily is on a clergy sabbatical. Eily and I worked together right out of college at the Presbyterian United Nations Office. We were also at the forefront of the struggle in the Presbyterian Church (USA) over the question of whether the church would open its ordination to LGBTQ people as ministers, deacons, and elders. She stayed in the church as an activist and helped birth the church into its place of greater openness today. She has a history of looking at what appears to be a dead end in the church, and seeing where God might be coaxing forth life. So, she was a helpful conversation partner as I grappled with this scripture. But even Eily started out by shaking her head, saying “I don't know about this one, Leah.”

In Luke's gospel, we hear about one atrocity, and one tragedy. There aren't any historical records of these two events that I saw; only Luke's gospel gives a report of them: first, that the Roman ruler Pilate slaughtered Galileans, and mingled their blood with sacrifices. The second, that a tower in a place called Siloam fell and killed 18 people when it crumbled.

There must have been people who had witnessed or heard of these two events, one an atrocity and one a tragedy, and shaken their heads and clicked their tongues, saying “Well, *everything happens for a reason.*” They may have gone on to think that the people who were killed in these two circumstances deserved it because of their sin. They may somewhere harbor the belief that since they themselves were still standing, then they were lucky, or even blessed—chosen by God to be kept safe.

Certainly there was a judgment theology that existed around Jesus' time, and still today, that taught that God would bless the good in this lifetime, and punish the bad in this lifetime; and so, when you saw people suffer from oppression or violence, there'd be part of you that would believe on some level that *they must deserve* this. I have heard people make this assumption about cancer. I have heard this said about the homeless. In the wake of natural disasters, some people utter these words to make sense of the senseless.

I suspect that some of the choices people made during the pandemic about avoiding masks, or avoiding vaccination, were not simply around not believing the virus was real. At a core level,

some people actually believe that the people who get sick from COVID are people who deserve it. These people, consciously or unconsciously, think that they won't get sick because *they don't deserve* to get sick, or that God doesn't want them to get sick. Someone I know told me throughout the first year of COVID about the kinds of people who get from COVID– in *his* opinion, they were people who don't take care of themselves. And because he eats well, and works out, he didn't see himself as one of *those* kinds of people. So, he ignored the environment around him– one where a virus was thriving–and he did not take any precautions against COVID. Turns out, he got pretty sick from COVID, and he had so much shame about his illness that he didn't admit it to anyone at first, not until he had recovered enough that he could act like it was no big deal.

But in Luke's gospel, Jesus completely troubles the kind of thinking that teaches that those who suffer must have deserved it. "Do you think these Galileans suffered because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you!" And then Jesus goes on to tell them that those who fail to repent– that is, change their ways of life to more abundant living – will bring judgment onto themselves.

Jesus then gives an example of a fig tree. We don't know why, but this fig tree is planted in the midst of a vineyard. I can't help but wonder, what is a fig tree doing in a field with so many vines of grapes? Was it to provide shade for the workers? Was it to maximize space, to squeeze as much out of the land as possible?

Whatever the reason, the fig tree was *not* thriving. So, the landowner puzzled over it and consulted with the gardener about what to do with this tree that bore no fruit.

Larissa Kwong Abazia, speaking from her perspective as an Asian American woman of color, says, "Many of us experience the world as a fig tree in the midst of grape vines. We are placed in fields not meant for us and yet expected to thrive. People discount and doubt us, threatening to cut us down if we don't produce in the ways that have been defined on our behalf. We are afterthoughts demanded to bear fruit or be destroyed."

Last week was the 1-year anniversary of the horrific killing of 9 Asian and Asian American women in and near Atlanta. This act of violence brought many in AAPI communities, and their allies, to claim space in their communities for AAPI well-being– not only for their safety, which has been threatened in alarming ways these past 2 years especially, but also for their thriving.

How often do we get to let the wrong people tell the stories that determine our thriving or our demise? Instead of seeing our value and worth as rooted in God's love, we allow people to make up stories that our worth is based in what we produce, what we achieve, where we are on the ladder of success, or on how well we fit into dominant notions of what is attractive. How often do we let a story shape our narrative, when it really is a story that does not belong to us?

You are no good. Have you ever told that story about yourself? Can you determine what voices gave you that idea to begin with? Let me assure you, a story like that *is not* the story God tells

about you. Instead of letting *that* story of worthlessness be the story told about the fig tree that produced no fruit, the gardener advised to wait to see what other story might blossom. The gardener knew the fault did not rest in the tree alone; in order to thrive enough to bear fruit, a tree needs a nourishing environment. Maybe it was crowded by grape vines. Maybe it wasn't getting the right amount of sun. "I know," said the gardener, "let me put some manure around it, and see what will happen after a year." The gardener had faith that life flowed inside the fig tree, and was committed to helping create the kind of environment where that tree could thrive.

My friend visiting town shared this wonderful quote with me, from Thich Nat Han, when we were talking about this fig tree. This Zen master and global leader, who died early this year, said: "When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce. Yet if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuce. Blaming has no positive effect at all, nor does trying to persuade using reason and argument. That is my experience. No blame, no reasoning, no argument, just understanding. If you understand, and you show that you understand, you can love, and the situation will change"

Last weekend we went to be part of a test audience for an advanced viewing of a movie called *Nimona*. The movie was in the works for many years by Blue Sky Studios, a subsidiary of Disney. It was to be the very first, full-length, animated feature film with a gender-bending character and a love story between two men who share a kiss. However, shortly into the pandemic, Disney shut down Blue Sky. Film production screeched to a halt. Scott Carroll, who has been part of our church since last summer, was the head animator on the movie; suddenly he and his colleagues were out of jobs. The thought that this ground-breaking, bold film would never reach audiences devastated Scott and others who had put so much heart into the movie. Some speculate whether Disney decided the risk of such a ground-breaking movie is not worth the fruits that it would bear in terms of representing children and families whose stories have not yet been told. Here was a chance: offer something to the world that can nourish the soil with love and understanding. But the fruits did not look like what people were expecting or what they were used to. The ax lay at the bottom of the tree, and it looked as if this tree's story was over.

However, a year later, another studio plucked the movie out of the dust of oblivion, and it seems as though we may get to see it brought to production. Last week, the Carrolls invited my family to a preliminary test screening of the movie. Pieces of the animation were still black and white sketch drawing, but the story was so compelling and its characters so endearing that the movie held together beautifully; the viewers cheered at the movie's conclusion. It turns out that something that many people had counted as dead, still had life in it, waiting to bloom. I hope that one day, children who have never seen themselves reflected in big production, animated films can see some glimmer of themselves in this movie, and it can be a spark of hope for how God is at work in them.

Our church is a community whose practice is to try to make the most nourishing spaces for those planted around us to grow. That means looking at one another and seeing that God has

put something of sacred worth in each one, whether we can see the fruit, or not. We hold faith in one another and in what God makes possible to spring forth. Today, we ordained and installed Eulalia and Diane as leaders in the church, and we are excited for what they can add to help nourish the soil. That care extends beyond our church community as well, as we look to make meaningful repentance— or change— from the injustices and hurts that limit others' well being and thriving.

In God's economy, the fig tree has worth even if it never produces fruit at all. Isaiah speaks of an invitation, "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters! You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." In God's economy, you are worthy of being nourished and fed regardless of your ability to pay. That offering comes first; when the environment of nurture is provided, usually the fruit follows.

Thank God for being willing to exist in the messy chaos with us, in the midst of the vines and literally, in the midst of the *crap*, to summon forth the life that is within you, that is within me.