



## **“A Fruitless Fig Tree and a Load of Manure”**

*Luke 13:1-9*

**Julie R. Harley – March 7, 2010 – First United Church of Oak Park**

Jason and his wife have a 13-year-old daughter. One day they found pot in her bedroom closet: problem number one. But there was also problem number two: she was dating a guy who smelled like smoke and answered questions with one-word answers, like Yeah, No and Whatever.

When Jason asked the boy to bring his daughter home by ten, the guy said, “Why?” Jason figured this boyfriend was one reason his daughter was smoking pot.

Jason talked with his friend Don about the problem. “Have you tried grounding her? Not letting her date this guy?” his friend asked.

“Yeah,” said Jason, “but the problem’s only gotten worse.”

Don thought for awhile and then said, “It sounds like your daughter is living a terrible story.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

Don is a writer, and he talked about how the best stories involve a character who wants something and overcomes conflict in order to get it. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on with your daughter, Jason, but it sounds like she’s not living a very good story. She’s caught up in a bad one.”

Jason went home that night and couldn’t sleep. He thought about the story his daughter was living and the role she had chosen for herself. Jason realized he hadn’t

mapped out a hopeful story for his family. They were just going along, without much intention, without much purpose.

Without a powerful story that would shape her life, his daughter chose a plot line that involved some risk and rebellion: marijuana and a sketchy boyfriend.

Jason began to think about his family's story. He wondered if there were a better story he could invite them all to join.

He went to his laptop computer and found an organization that builds orphanages around the world. He learned that it costs about \$25,000 to build one orphanage, and there was a great need for one in Mexico.

He called a family meeting. Jason told his wife and daughter about this village in Mexico and all the terrible things that would happen if there is no orphanage for the children. And he said he had contacted this organization and committed that their family would build the orphanage.

His wife looked at him like he'd lost his mind. His daughter looked upset. She knew this would mean she'd have to give up her allowance and maybe a few other things. They sat in silence for awhile, then his wife and daughter went to their separate rooms without talking to Jason.

That night when they went to bed, Jason talked more with his wife about the concept of their family story, how they weren't taking risks and they weren't helping anybody and how their daughter was losing interest and turning to things that were risky.

The next day his wife came up to Jason when he was doing the dishes and put her arms around him, leaned her face into his neck, and told Jason she was proud of him.

He apologized for not talking to her about the whole idea earlier, and she said it didn't matter. They had an orphanage to build, and they were probably going to make bigger mistakes, but they would build it.

A few days later, their 13-year-old daughter came her parents and said she wanted to go to Mexico. She could take pictures of the children there and post them on her website to raise money for the orphanage.

About a month later, she broke up with her boyfriend. She had his picture on her dresser and she took it down. She was ready to live a better story.

Jason said, “My daughter knows who she is now. She just forgot for a little while.” (From *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* by Donald Miller.)

This family found something they all wanted: to build an orphanage. And their story has direction, because it will not be easy for them to achieve this. They will go through conflict, but it will have a purpose. Their story has become larger than themselves. And that makes all the difference.

Our lives have little meaning without a coherent story line. One reason we come to church is that our souls thirst for a powerful story that will connect us with God.

When children are baptized here, they become part of God’s great story.

When new members join, they are a new chapter in the ongoing story of this open community, united in love and justice.

Those of us who joined our lives with God’s story many years ago still ask the same questions. “What is my life about? What does God want me to do?” We have to rewrite our story over and over again, as our lives change and grow.

As we watch terrible things happen around the world, it threatens our belief that we can make a difference. Like every generation that came before us, we ask God questions like, “Why do good people suffer?”

When people are pushed around by powerful politicians – like the three to four million citizens of Colombia who have been internally displaced, like the thousands who are killed in Colombia by guerillas who are paid by their body count -- is it because they deserve it?

When people are killed by an act of nature – whether it is an earthquake in Chile or in Haiti --- is it because they are worse sinners than we are?

What’s the religious meaning in these experiences of suffering?

Jesus says these deaths are not a divine punishment. That’s the good news.

But here's the bad news, Jesus says. Instead of wondering whether they deserved to die, look at yourself. Look at your own story, not theirs. How do you need to repent? How do you need to rewrite the story of your life?

We know that to repent means to say you're sorry. But repentance means more than that. **To repent is to allow God to rewrite our stories.**

God is already doing mission in the world, standing with the Colombian people who are victimized by paramilitaries.

When we let God guide our feet in global mission, all of us at First United become part of God's story of grace. **To repent is to allow God to rewrite our stories so that we begin to bear fruit with our lives.** What is holding you back from living a story that is redemptive, that is hopeful, that engages you as a lead character in fulfilling God's mission on earth?

Jesus tells us a parable about a fig tree that has no figs. It's just taking up space.

This fig tree inhales tons of nutrients from the soil and the air, it soaks in endless rays of sunlight, it drinks buckets of rain, and it grows tall in the vineyard . . . but it bears no fruit.

That's a pretty sad story. Everyone knows fig trees exist to provide food for other living creatures. The gardeners have let this fig tree grow for the first three years of its life without expecting any fruit, but now it has been another three years, and there is still nothing growing on it.

The vineyard owner is ready to cut it down. It has no economic value for him. For him, the tree is a waste of time and a waste of valuable soil, because it is not producing results. The vineyard owner wants to cut his losses.

But the gardener sees the fig tree differently. The gardener looks past the fruitless branches of the tree. **He looks at the root problem, not the fruit problem.**

The gardener asks the vineyard owner to show some mercy on this fruitless tree. "Let it alone for one more year. Let me dig around the roots, aerate the soil, and put manure on it. Then we'll see what happens. If it bears fruit next year, it will be a good investment. If not, then you can cut it down."

The gardener's suggestion is highly unusual. Most fig trees don't need to be fertilized. But this one obviously needs help.

Do you have a fruitless fig tree in your life?

A never-ending job search that yields no results?

A child who graduated and still depends on you for financial support?

A stagnant relationship? A house you can't sell?

Investments that go down instead of up?

A terrible life story that's going nowhere fast?

Look down at the roots. Your tree may be going nowhere, but at least it's still standing. The axe has not yet fallen. You have been spared, by the mercy of God.

Look down at the roots. Is that fruitless tree surrounded by manure?

Maybe that load of manure is not a curse. Maybe it's not something that just happens. Sometimes a load of manure is a sign of God's grace.

After all, we're here to bear fruit.

Maybe the manure is there for fertilizer. Amen.