



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Wake Up Calls

Luke 13:1-9

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

March 24, 2019

As parables go, I think this is a tough one. On its face, it's harsh and it's threatening. How are we to understand it?

One way to think about it is through the lenses of a New Testament scholar named John Dominic Crossan. In his book about the Lord's Prayer, he draws a sharp distinction between the kingdom theologies of John the Baptist and Jesus. He would say, I think, that the vineyard owner in our text has the John the Baptist theology of the kingdom, "Repent now, or you are doomed," and that the gardener has the Jesus theology of the kingdom, "Follow me, join me in the work of the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

It's possible, I guess, to look at this parable as holding two contrary theologies, but I think that might be oversimplifying what we have here. I want to offer another perspective.

Last summer in a sermon about a healing narrative, I talked about Jesus' ministry as being improvisational. In so many circumstances, instead of meeting the situation with a "no" or a "but," Jesus instead keeps the action going and meets it with a "yes, and." It seems to me that it's helpful to see the gardener in this story as a good improv actor. I propose we keep this in our mind as we look more closely at the parable.

Our text begins with Jesus caught up in the contemporary news cycle of his day; terrible things have happened to folks, things akin to shootings in New Zealand mosques or the streets of Chicago, things akin to devastating cyclones in Mozambique.<sup>2</sup> After talking about this, Jesus says that unless his listeners repent, they will perish just like the folks in the headlines.

This part of our text raises all sorts of questions about sin and guilt and punishment, and I am telling you straight out that those are questions for another sermon. I'm including these verses in the text this morning, because they set the stage for the parable Jesus tells to illustrate his call to repentance.

A man has a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and the fig tree has no fruit. The man tells the gardener to cut it down. The owner makes a harsh judgment, and he meets the situation with a strong no. The action is about to stop.

---

<sup>1</sup>John Dominic Crossan. *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 85-95.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew Skinner. "How to Survive the Sequester: Syria and Other Threatening Headlines," Huffpost. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-l-skinner/luke-13-1-9-how-to-survive-the-sequester-syria-and-other-threatening-headlines\\_b\\_2767924.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-l-skinner/luke-13-1-9-how-to-survive-the-sequester-syria-and-other-threatening-headlines_b_2767924.html). Accessed 3/14/19.

But the gardener doesn't let that happen. With a first century version of a "yes, and" the gardener keeps the action moving, just like any good improv actor. The gardener encourages the owner to think twice. Leave it be for another year, the gardener suggests. "Give me a chance to loosen up the dirt, fertilize the tree, nurture it. Next year let's see whether there's fruit or not." Be patient. Work with it. Trust the process.

There the parable ends. We do not know what happens next, and that's part of what makes the story so interesting. What are we to make of it?

As I said, Jesus tells this story to illustrate his sharp statement: Repent or you will perish just like the people in these catastrophic news stories. What is Jesus looking for? What sort of change does he call for with this parable? Who is being asked to repent: the vineyard owner, the gardener, the fig tree?

Maybe it is the vineyard owner who is being asked to repent. When we first looked at this text in preparation for Lent, the worship committee recognized that the theme "Take Nothing With You" could resonate this week with the owner's challenge to examine his expectations. Perhaps that is a challenge that resonates with us, too. Many of us engage the world with our expectation bars set really high. We have high expectations of ourselves: good grades, good jobs, good incomes, good performances in whatever theater of life we find ourselves. We also have pretty high expectations of others. How many of those expectations are too high, or unrealistic, or maybe just poorly timed? I wonder which of our expectations God might be inviting us to relinquish.

I also wonder if the gardener has a little bit of repenting to do, too. He could be covering his tracks here. Maybe the gardener expected the fig tree to bear fruit without any help; he took the tree's growth for granted and ended up being a tad bit negligent. His expectation was that he did not need to get involved. His challenge now is to reverse that behavior and his thinking, and perhaps that's a challenge that resonates with us, too. Have we, maybe, turned our back on our responsibilities or on opportunities we might have had to help others? I wonder if this parable might not be nudging some of us to get more involved in a situation where we can make a difference.

I suspect the fig tree has a little bit of repenting to do, too. It seems to have operated with the expectation that it can do whatever it pleases and get away with it, and now it's been called on the carpet. We are all expected to bear some kind of fruit, and, as Christians we are expected to bear the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5: 22-23). I know our theme is "Take Nothing With You," but I want to argue that these values are the exception to that theme. We need to take every single one of these expectations with us. What we need to leave behind is the fruit-less expectation, the growing cultural assumption that values like kindness and patience and self-control can be left behind because they are not cool or because they are too PC. That is complete and utter nonsense.

I struggle every day with the temptation to act in fruitless ways. I am as prone as anybody else to nastiness, and meanness, and self-indulgence. What about you? In what ways have you harbored expectations or practices of fruitlessness? How might God be calling you to repent?

There is a wake-up call that comes in this text, and maybe it's a wake-up call to every character in the narrative. Maybe it's a wake-up call to us.

We have had something of a wake-up call here at First United with regard to our senior high youth program, FUSH. The decision to suspend regular programming, in order to give us space to evaluate and reboot our program so that it might bear better fruit, has felt like someone took an ax to the tree. It has been abrupt and

painful, and it's put us all on high alert. It's demanded of us, youth and adults alike, that we examine our assumptions and expectations about FUSH and the fruit it produces.

I did not select this text for today with our current situation in mind. We identified this text months ago, but I have to say it comes at an opportune time. There are two dimensions of this text that are particularly relevant for us, here at First United.

The first is repentance. Jesus is clear about this being a priority. He is keenly aware of the big distance between the world God dreams for us and the world we live in now. Jesus wants all of us to reshape our lives in ways that produce healthy, life-giving fruit. We need to hear that message not just now, but repeatedly.

We also need to hear the rest of the parable. We need to think about the "yes, and," because the gospel is found both in the call to repentance and in what comes next. We also need to hear the rest of the parable, because at First United a "yes, and" is exactly what we hope to do with FUSH as we move forward.

Yes, and: Jesus recognizes that repentance – change – requires more than threats. If we want to bear fruit, we're going to need a gardener. The gardener is a really important character in this parable. The gardener says to the owner with the ax, "Leave the tree alone." Let it be. Another translation is "Forgive the tree." This is the same verb that we find in the Lord's Prayer in the petition, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Leave it alone.

The story does not end here. It's tempting to think that we could end this story with a proclamation of forgiveness, and the ax being put down, and everybody goes about their business as before. But that's not the way the story goes, and it's probably not the way forgiveness really goes, either. The gardener does a second "Yes, and."

In the same breath that he says "Forgive the tree," the gardener volunteers to enact the forgiveness he requests. I'll fertilize the tree, he says. I'll loosen the dirt around it so the ground can better absorb rain and the tree roots can sink more deeply into the earth. I'll do what I can to make it healthy. Maybe next year it will bear fruit.

Please note that the end result of fruit is of primary concern to both the owner and the gardener. And the gardener is willing to provide the love and care and support that the tree might need. That is also something we really need to hear.

We had a great work day last Sunday at First United. About 20-30 people, many of them senior high youth, worked in the yard. They cut down bushes, cleared out dead leaves and twigs, raked up debris. They made space for new things to be planted and new things to grow. They gardened.

This is what forgiveness looks like, according to this parable. It looks like the work that a crew of gardeners does when you hire them to come do a spring or fall clean up in your yard. It looks like the work that you might do, if you toodle like I do in the garden: weeding, planting bulbs, splitting up perennials, moving the hydrangea that hasn't flowered in four years, mulching, whatever it takes.

Forgiveness is human gardening – providing people the love and support they need, whatever it takes, so that they can bear the fruit God calls us all to produce.

I like this imagery of forgiveness as gardening. It's new for me, with this sermon. I've always tended to think about forgiveness as an interchange between people: the acceptance of an apology, or a willingness to let go of a grudge or a hurt in order to straighten out a situation or relationship. It is that, of course. But before now I've not thought about forgiveness as also being the routine, everyday work of clearing out dead growth, uprooting weeds, setting new plants in place, supporting each other as we all seek to produce the fruits of the spirit.

Maybe this is what our life together should be all about: gardening forgiveness with each other. Maybe this is the quality and spirit of ministry that we should be fostering here and at all churches: gardening forgiveness. I have to think about that more, and perhaps you do, too, if this parable has caught your imagination as it has caught mine. For now I leave you with the hope that the gardener of this parable will dig around in our dirt, and fertilize us, and forgive us into being the church that God calls us to be, in the name of Jesus, our brother, our friend, our redeemer. Amen.