

<sup>1</sup> At that very time, there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.” <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the man working the vineyard, ‘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?’ <sup>8</sup> He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Luke 13:1-9

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“Looking For Fruit”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Comedian Bob Newhart used to tell about a time he took a job as an accountant in downtown Chicago. He wrote, “As your basic 9-to-5 bookkeeper, my duties included managing the petty cash. Salesmen would come in from the road and turn in their receipts. I’d give them cash and put the receipts in the petty-cash drawer. At the end of the day, I’d have to reconcile what was in the drawer with the receipts. It was always close, but it never balanced. At five o’clock, when everybody else was leaving the office, I’d be tearing my hair out because petty cash was short by \$1.48. Around 8 pm, I’d finally find the discrepancy.

“I followed this routine for a couple weeks. Finally, one day, I pulled the amount I was short from my pocket—\$1.67—put it in the drawer, and called it a day. Not long after, the petty cash drawer was over by \$2.11. So I took \$2.11 out of petty cash and pocketed that. I was hardly stealing. Inevitably, in the next couple of days, I would come up short, and back the money would go.

“After several weeks of this, Mr. Hutchinson, head of accounting, discovered my shortcut to balancing petty cash. “George,” he lectured me, using my given name, “these are not sound accounting principles.”

To which I responded, “You know, Mr. Hutchinson, I just don’t think I’m cut out for accounting. Why would you pay me \$6 an hour to spend four hours finding \$1.40?” [4 ¶s from Bob Newhart, “Finding My Funny Bone,” *Reader’s Digest* (Sept. 2006), p. 93-94.]

Bob Newhart asks a very sensible and logical question. Why would anyone spend \$24 to find \$1.40? That just defies logic. The farmer in Jesus’ parable this morning asks a very similar question. Why should I keep investing in something that offers no return – a tree that takes up space, nutrients, water, and time from my staff, but bears no fruit. But of course, Jesus isn’t really talking about fruit, per se. The way I see it, this lesson is really talking about waste—not waste of material things but of spiritual things. In other words, wasted opportunities, wasted energy, wasted time, wasted dreams, wasted gifts. It’s about what makes for productive, meaningful lives. Let’s look a little more closely at this lesson.

As Luke 13 opens, Jesus has been teaching. Throughout chapter 12, Jesus has taught them about avoiding hypocrisy, overcoming fear and worry, the faithfulness of God, the futility of wealth if it isn’t used in service to God, the importance of watching and staying alert for God’s movement, and the

reality that his message will cause conflict and division between those who get it and those who don't. Chapter 12 ends with Jesus warning his listeners that just as a debtor on his or her way to court should make every effort to settle before being dragged before the judge, so we are called to repent and seek reconciliation with God, for our time is short.

It's a sobering lesson. As chapter 13 opens, Jesus is interrupted by some of his listeners. Exactly why they bring up the tragedy that befell a group of Galileans who were slaughtered by Roman soldiers as they were offering sacrifices in the temple isn't clear. But Jesus takes it as that age-old question: did they suffer their terrible fate because they were sinful? The theory that bad things happen because it's deserved has been around since humankind first began trying to understand our existence many, many millennia ago. It's human nature to want to find some explanation for terrible things that happen. We do this because we're intimidated, angered, and saddened by tragedy that does not make sense. That hunger to believe there must be a reason, an explanation, a purpose, is in fact, born of a hunger to control our environment. We want things to make sense, to follow rules, to fit patterns. But the fact is, often enough, they don't. In fact, there is much we do not and cannot control. The good news is that God is not an indifferent observer in these moments. God loves us, comforts us, empowers us. In those times when everything is out of control, it helps to remember that God's power is love – it is the source and drive of God's work in the world. And it is the most powerful force on earth.

For Jesus, the greatest tragedy is not the violent deaths of those Galileans slaughtered by Pilate or the eighteen killed with the tower of Siloam fell on them, as heartbreaking as those are. The greatest tragedy is a life that has no meaning or purpose. The greatest tragedy is to take space and not do anything with it. Twice, Jesus cautions the crowd, "Unless you repent, you'll perish as they did." When he says that, he's not referring to the manner of their death. I think that Jesus was making the point that the tragedy of these deaths was not in their gruesomeness, but in their pointlessness.

All of us are sinners. There isn't one of us, including me, that isn't guilty of sin. "Saint Augustine once wrote, "Whatever we are, we are not what we ought to be." Like the Apostle Paul, I wrestle with my sinful nature all the time. I love the way the Message translates Paul's exasperation with himself in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans: I "I know what is right, but I cannot do it! I decide to do good, but don't really do it. I decide not to do bad, but then I go and do it anyway!" [from Romans 7:18-19 – *The Message*]. Our will is at war with the power of sin deep inside us, and if nothing moves us beyond that, we grow jaded, cynical, despairing, and life begins to lose meaning. Jesus calls us to repentance, but it's not merely about feeling remorse for sin. Repentance is about discovering the newness of life.

Many of you know that I'm a big NCIS fan, and an episode leapt into my mind as I was thinking about repentance and new life earlier this week. In Season 9, Episode 9, Lieutenant Gabriella Flores works with a school for Afghani girls in Helmand Province. As it turns out, one of the teachers at the school is an extremist, serving as a spy feeding information to Taliban forces, who attack the school bus when it is attempting to deliver some of the girls home. Lieutenant Flores is missing and presumed dead until satellite surveillance shows her fleeing the scene of the bus attack with two of the little girls in the school. They are captured and held until the NCIS investigation pinpoints her location and the marines move in to rescue. Sadly, her commanding officer, Marine Captain Craig Quincy, is killed in the rescue. I want to show you a two minute clip of her conversation with Agent Gibbs following her rescue...

*[Show Clip from NCIS, season 9, episode 9, "Engaged, Part II" 25:35-27:30  
on CBS / Paramount Plus]*

She should watch those girls change the world in positive ways she could never have imagined. That's a gift. The punishment is knowing that she could have done the same. This one that leveled so much harm had chance to make a difference in the world – a chance squandered in herself and denied to the next generation. In this lesson, Jesus teaches his followers that sin may be understood as spiritual wastefulness. Repentance means 'turn around'. The Greek word for repentance is *Metanoia*, composed

of two parts: *meta* meaning ‘change’ and *noia* meaning ‘mind’. Repentance is really about our attitude—about choosing to let go of whatever holds us back so that we can be open to God moving in new ways through unanticipated means. Repentance is freeing—is life-giving and life-renewing. We acknowledge our humanness, our falling short of everything we wish we were, our brokenness, our imperfections, our prejudices, and our hunger to control things. Repent. Start over. Accept grace. Let go. Begin fresh. That’s what God offers us—not once, but over and over and over and over again.

That’s where the fig tree comes in. A man plants a fig tree and for three years, he waters it, tends it, nurtures it as it grows. But here it is, the beginning of a fourth season, and there’s still no fruit. So he says to the gardener, “Cut it down!” It’s wasting space. It’s leaching nutrients from the soil. It’s robbing the vines of precious water.” That’s harsh!

A few years back, a colleague of mine shared a story about his time as a teacher, before he became a pastor. While serving as a teacher, he taught night classes to help people get their GEDs. He talked about how many of his students had, at one time or another, been told that they were a waste a space, a waste of resources, a hopeless cause. Many of them had been written off by teachers, society, even family. He asked: “Do you know what it feels like to go to school each day knowing that most of the people around you considered you to be a problem?” That question makes my heart ache. I imagine that more than just his students have experienced that feeling. Anyone who has ever walked into a soup kitchen for a meal, or spent the night at a homeless shelter, or visited a free medical clinic, or called a suicide hotline, or stood alone on the playground, or sat idle behind bars, or just gone through the motions to get through the day, or pulled the covers up over their head and rolled over rather than face the day may know what it feels like to carry a burden of feeling like “I’m the problem”.

But what happens? The gardener intercedes for the tree. Let me dig around, loosen the soil, soften that hard heart just a bit. Let me fertilize, which is just a nice way of saying, “let me work through the crap in your life.” Give it more time, and let’s see if it doesn’t bear fruit.

It may interest you to realize that Jesus never tells us that fate of that fig tree. Maybe that’s because it’s up to us to embrace the gardener’s grace and bear fruit. The choice is in our hands. I find it meaningful that in those days (and sometimes years) when I feel like that barren tree, there is a gardener who will not only go to bat for me with the owner, but who will work with me in this next year I am given to see that I bear some fruit; who turns manure into nourishment. He pleads mercy for us in our barren days and years, offers sustenance for us to grow in the grace period we are given, standing by us with life-giving love.

Friends, every last one of us is made to bear fruit. God doesn’t make wastes of space. Which means you are not a waste of space. Your life has meaning and purpose. When God looks at you, God doesn’t see a waste or a problem. God sees a person, a precious child, loved, one worth dying for. That’s the message of Jesus Christ. Jesus has no interest in cutting us down. You’re allowed to change your mind. You’re encouraged to turn around. You can be made new. Spiritual wastefulness is not our destiny or our calling. But it is our choice. No one else has the right or the authority or the power to trap us in our past, our sins, or our brokenness. But sometimes we let it happen. We tell ourselves the lies the world tells us. We were made by God to bear fruit. God will define our worth. God will take the waste, the pain, the crap in our lives and use it, not because God sends or wishes suffering upon us, but because it is God’s nature and character to redeem. As we take up our cross to follow Jesus, I’m less interested in the bad we may have overcome or beaten back than I am in the opportunities we’ve wasted, the people we’ve written off, the talents and gifts we’ve buried, the dreams we’ve abandoned, the calling we’ve forsaken. The gift is to let God work in us to change the world in positive ways no one ever could have imagine. The punishment is the squandering of that opportunity, that chance, that gift.

So you tell me: what’s the fate of that tree? Amen