

Second Chance

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

I want you to take a moment and think of the worst thing that you have ever said, done, thought or felt. How long do you think you'll need? Maybe I could refine that a little for you. I want you to take a moment and think of the worst thing that you have ever said, done, thought, or felt, and were never found out.

I don't know if that makes you more relieved, or more anxious.

And now having thought about it, and before you banish it deep, deep down into your memory where nobody must ever, ever go, just imagine that that thing, that time, that thought, that action, that event, is the one that is just about to be exposed. Television, radio, newspaper, and the next Parish Magazine and Church email. That thing, that one thing, that you have dreaded all your life would ever be found out about you. For all to see, judge, condemn, or quietly know about you that without ever saying a word, always remains in their mind each time you meet. Your reputation, character, standing with family and friends ruined. Your principles, your faith, exposed as a thin veneer over what you are sure is a deep well of hypocrisy, where other bad things and dark secrets lurk. And in your own eyes, worse than everything else, your self-esteem has vanished. You feel, barren, worthless, a waste of space.

We all worry about that moment. The summons to the headmaster's office. The blue and white flashing light in the rear-view mirror. Someone leaving a message on your answer machine that only says, "We need to talk." The Minister asking if he could have a few words.

A practical joke is attributed to either Mark Twain or Arthur Conan Doyle. A man sends a telegram to twelve of his friends that reads, "All is discovered. Flee now." All twelve leave the country! We live in fear of judgment. We live in fear of discovery. We live in fear that there is no second chance for the likes of us.

For any who have been in that situation, or fear they might, Jesus has something to say to you. It is the parable of the Fig Tree.

“Fruitfulness and barrenness are compelling themes of Jesus’ teaching, and they are also powerful metaphors for human life. Seasons of fruitfulness and seasons of barrenness come in a variety of ways. In this passage Jesus encourages His followers to repent, and then He tells a parable about bearing fruit. He tells the parable of a Fig Tree that has not put forth any fruit in three years. The man who owns the tree is ready to cut it down, but the gardener begs for just one more year and some special care for this fruitless tree.”ⁱ

Jesus offers us the gospel of the second chance. He tells people about the good news of being given a second chance. But more than that, He tells us that it is unlikely that we will be able to sort things out in our lives by ourselves. We will need help. “Fig trees normally do not require much attention, but the gardener (the Jesus figure) proposes unusual care and effort...Rather than immediate destruction, which would be justified, a delay is in effect to provide a last chance to produce. There is still time, but not much.”ⁱⁱ

Is this a story for you today, or for people you know? What does the parable of the Fig Tree tell you? If the owner is God, what does God expect from the Fig Tree – figs – it was what it was designed to produce. It wasn’t. Is God impatient with us for not bearing the fruit of our faith? What about the Fig Tree? Is that you? Tired, spiritually undernourished, unrealised potential? Who is the head gardener? Is it Jesus? He comes to prune the scruffy, non-productive fig tree; rather unglamorously He says it needs more manure, and give that tired old tree one more year, a second chance, and if it still doesn’t produce, then chop it down.

Hiding guilty secrets? Nursing a sense of unworthiness? Fearing being found out? Not thinking you’re good enough? Recognising that you’re not realising your potential? Jesus says, “Ask yourself if you are like that fig tree. Are you bearing fruit or just taking up space?”ⁱⁱⁱ Three years should have been enough time for the fig tree to be productive. The logical course of action would have been to uproot the unproductive tree so that it didn’t take up valuable ground that could have been used to nourish something more productive and fruit-bearing. Jesus tells a story of second chance, having the gardener doing something that simply does not make sense under the circumstances. He tells a story of the extravagant nature of God’s mercy. People still

need to respond to that mercy; there is a limited time, but to all of the guilty, unproductive, space-wasters, a second chance is given.^{iv}

I suspect there is not a person in this Church today who does not need to hear, again, that message of the second chance. Each one of us, at some time, and in some way, have let down the people around us, let down ourselves, let down God. We might be tempted to give up. We might be tempted to say, “How can anyone be expected, realistically, to live up to the counsel of perfection that is the Christian faith?” We might think that so bad, or base, or even ridiculously petty our faults and sins might be, that God will give up on us as a bad lot, not worth bothering about, and move on to something better, and more productive, and closer to what God wants.

What we learn from this story of Jesus is that if the privilege of being God’s people does not lead to productivity, it still leads to judgement.^v But we learn also about the second chance. Jesus does not give up, and does not leave us alone to sort things out by ourselves. God’s mercy is still in conversation with God’s judgment. Jesus works with us, persistently, until we bear fruit. And we will; and we do. The gardener is as devoted to the fig tree as Jesus is to us.

So yes, think of your deepest shame, your darkest secret. It’s not right; it’s not good; it needs addressing. God calls for your repentant hearts, but that is not all. Like the gardener, Jesus tends us and cultivates us toward bearing fruit. That is a source of hope.

Not only for individuals, but for nations, and cities, and communities. At each level that hope is extended: the ministry of the second chance. Not only something for us to receive, and God knows we, all of us, may need it. It is also something for us to practise. How quick have we been to judge, and condemn, and to harden our hearts, with or without justification, against people in our homes, or in our workplace, or here in church? If God’s extravagant mercy floods our sometimes withered lives, how much might we, recipients of that mercy, show it to others, who too need second chances, from us, as well as from God? As Jesus says elsewhere, “Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

The second chance we are given is the second chance we are called to share. Lots of barren fig trees out there, maybe your loving care, along with Christ’s, might yet bring them to bear fruit.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Abigail W Kocher, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 2, p26

ⁱⁱ Klyne R Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p264

ⁱⁱⁱ Rodney Clapp, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2, p96

^{iv} Leslie J Hoppe, *ibid*, p97

^v Snodgrass, *ibid* p265