

“Looking for Fruit on the Fig Tree”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Second Sunday in Lent
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 28, 2021

Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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 others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

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. So he said to the gardener, ‘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?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

...At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Rabbi Ariel Burger recently [spoke to interviewer Krista Tippett](#) for the radio program “On Being”. There were many illuminating moments in their conversation, focused on the holy calling for people to “be a blessing”, but listen to this metaphor of urgency and compassion. Rabbi Burger suggested that “the world is a baby in our hands, and the baby’s running a fever. And if I were holding a baby, my baby, in my arms and the baby were running a fever, I would feel two things that don’t always come together... One is such a sense of tenderness and love and openheartedness; and also, such a sense of ferocity and willingness to fight and do whatever I need to do to get this baby well.” To be a blessing simultaneously requires both fierce love and fierce urgency.

We see both love and urgency here in Jesus, who has set his face toward Jerusalem and can already foresee the coming conflict that will end his life. There’s talk of calamities, both human-caused ones like violence against innocents, and natural disasters like earthquakes and buildings collapsing. Those around Jesus want to uncover secret sins in the victims to explain why this happened. The impulse stems from this human desire for control in the face of calamity. “If we can figure out why this happened, we can keep it from happening to us.” Instead, Jesus names the hovering nature of death, possible at any moment, and calls disciples therefore to make the most of each moment in life. Bad things do happen—to good and bad people alike—so tragedy is more like the rule than the exception. What’s surprising is not that these people over here died, but that you haven’t yet! So repent while you still have time; amend your actions and choose wisely; make the most of this life right now, because none of us have forever. Out of deep tenderness and love, but with an eye on the shortness of life, Jesus urgently, impatiently determines to goose his disciples into growth.

Jesus doesn't have time for blame games, practiced by those who go through the world suggesting that bad things are punishment for secret sins. People become faultfinders, always seeking out the flaws in others or ourselves. This delays corrective action—analyzing problems as a way of procrastinating solutions. There is a permissive and privileged indulgence behind this behavior, which squanders precious time rather than urgently addressing the issues at hand. But Jesus calls us to spend less time worrying about who started what, and more time instead on repenting, on living differently so that we can be part of finding actual solutions. The poet Mary Oliver holds together both the urgency and tenderness of Jesus when she [writes](#): “Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

This is the vital question Jesus likewise poses in the parable of the fig tree. The gardener believes that renewed, fruitful life is possible for this fruitless tree, and he successfully wins time to nurture and tend in order to try for that fruit. Yet there's a limit to this time—if the tree is not bearing fruit in another year then it will come down. In other words, as long as we live there is time for renewal and change, but that time is not endless, so step to it now—don't wait for another day.

We are in such a clarifying moment now as a church and culture. We have seen in the last year the frailty of life and failures of American society. We grieve the untimely death of those we know and don't know, the 500,000 people whose lives were cut short by the coronavirus. We face the fruitlessness of racism and poverty, raging deadly plagues that take countless further lives when those with privilege, influence and power look the other way, fail to get involved, and so give implicit consent to injustice. Now more than ever, at the bedside of a world sick from fear, division, mistrust and hate, Christ reveals the vital need for active, loving, compassionate discipleship. God looks to us, and to communities like ours, as trees that are called upon to bear the fruits of joy, welcome and service. Such good things are not inevitable or guaranteed, especially in challenging times. The window of opportunity is not open forever—it is possible to lose a chance or squander a blessing, and the tree may yet be cut down. Yet with urgent, passionate, visible and persistent faith, with a commitment to repentance and being a blessing, God can open the way in us to greater faithfulness and fruitfulness. What Jesus is asking here is not a polite faith only; peace isn't going to look like everyone getting along and singing kumbaya together. Living with fruitful love doesn't mean looking the other way from injustice or pretending that “everything's fine”. Sometimes loving discipleship calls us to speak urgent truth in the face of fearful power.

The conversation between Krista Tippett and Rabbi Ariel Burger describes such a faithful stance as “creative maladjustment” to the status quo. Krista Tippett [described](#) a sermon that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached at Temple Israel Hollywood in the 1960s, where he said: “Maybe the world is in need of the formation of a new organization: The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment — men and women who will be as maladjusted as the Prophet Amos, who, in the midst of the injustices of his day would cry out in words that echo across the centuries ... as maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln, who had the vision to see that this nation could not survive half slave and half free”. In other words, loyalty to the realm of God on earth as in heaven asks us to love every person made in God's image—no matter where they live, what they look like, or how they pray—with such fierce and urgent love that we will be creatively maladjusted to the threats on their life and ours.

So think again of that opening image from Rabbi Burger, the infant in arms who elicits immense love and passion for healing. How would it be to see through God's eyes, and regard ourselves as the feverish baby? Would we start to make changes today that we have put off for too long—facing uncomfortable truths, bravely doing the hard thing we know we must, for such deep love of ourselves, for what God knows is possible and wants for us? How would it be to regard our neighbors, strangers and enemies as the feverish baby? Would we release our judgments, make the first move toward

forgiveness, and seek the good of the other because we see them with the fervent love of God? How would it feel to hold the whole world in the enduring, encouraging ways of God, both immensely loving and passionate for healing—and act accordingly? This is the day for such faithful, fervent action. Wait no longer, Jesus says, and bear good fruit for the loving realm of God. Amen.