

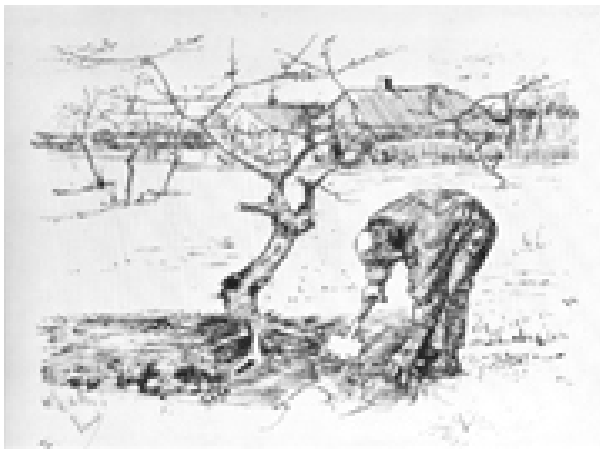
March 20, 2022, Lent 3

Luke 13:1-9

You are Worthy

Reader's note: On this first day of Spring, this sermon was preceded by a children's story where I brought in my Christmas poinsettia. I asked: how many of you are judgmental? How many of you have made judgments today? We all make judgments all the time, e.g., what we will wear today, what we will eat for breakfast, if someone else made breakfast for you -- you made a judgment about your how you will react to it...

My poinsettia does not look as good as it did at Christmas, but it isn't dead either. Thumbs up or thumbs down – should I keep the poinsettia? I retold the story of the fig tree, emphasizing that in the end, the gardener asked that the fig tree be given more *time*.



Prayer: O God, your thoughts are not our thoughts, and your ways are not our ways. Help us in these moments to find new vitality within the limits of our mortality, and to celebrate your eternal love. You call us to have faith in you, help us to recognize that we are worthy of your love, help us to recognize your love for others...

Vincent van Gogh, *In the Orchard, or, Gardener near a Gnarled Apple Tree*. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=59091>

In Luke 13 we find Jesus mid-way through a sermon about watchfulness and faithfulness, in difficult circumstances. He tells them right before this passage, "...you know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" It's a question about their judgment – good in some areas, lacking in others.

In this time Pilate had ordered the killing of some Galileans while they were making sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. It is reported to Jesus: "Pilate mingled their blood with their sacrifices." Jesus asks, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" And what about those who were killed in Siloam when the tower fell on them? "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Jesus is asking them to think again about the judgements they have made about the victims of these tragedies. And we are challenged to think about the way we judge each other.

We are coming through a season of judgments/judgmentalism. Are you vaccinated, boosted? Has this information been used to close doors or open them in the last year? Were you able or unable to do things because of your covid status? We've had a lot of people die of Covid-19 – over 1 million in the United States alone. Some of them, likely preventable – and that's where the judging starts. So often, the first question has not been, "how are you managing without your loved one" instead it is so often – "were they vaccinated?" We ask this to judge their death – of course. Right or wrong? Their vaccination status matters very little to those who loved them and are grieving. And yet we judge, we look at the statistics, we calculate odds, we pass judgment on whether the death was preventable – from this safe distance above ground.

Jesus does not blame or label victims in this manner. Jesus lets his gaze rest instead on human suffering. That is a harder place to look. At our open wounds. Jesus heals victims, sometimes on the sabbath – which is against the law. All those healing miracles he does, there is no mention of his stopping to hear the history of how he caught leprosy (who were you hanging out with that you caught this terrible disease?), or when the bleeding began for her 12 years ago (what had she eaten, what therapies had she already tried?) The story behind the paralysis is not his focus. Jesus sees the suffering, heals the wound, and sends them on their way with a second chance at wellness. All of those whom Jesus healed went on to die of other things later, but for now, for that moment, they have time, health, and wellness. It's a gift.

And this is a gift we can give each other. I have been in several conversations since I have arrived here about what it means that South Church is Open and Affirming.¹ Who? Who precisely is welcome and affirmed? Are some people more welcome than others? This is one of those gospel values that is all at once easy and difficult. It means we welcome all people. We do not welcome all behaviors. We welcome all people; and that does not mean that you need to agree with everyone here about everything. It means we welcome all people. You can continue to love who you love and come here. We welcome all people. Your family may embarrass you, and we welcome them too. A church is a place where we grow together, learn from each other, challenge and support each other. We have beliefs, yes, and we have doubts as well. We welcome all people. Bring your family and friends, those who are ready for church and those who do not feel prepared. We welcome all people.

Because we are not here to judge each other. God is our judge, and friends, that is good news. It is not our role to do the judging – we are not qualified. Jesus suggests that rather than judging, we give each other time.

I think you are good at this South Church. In the last 8 days, you have celebrated the baptism of a baby, and grieved with a family who has lost a child.

¹ The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury voted to become Open and Affirming in June of 1991. Since then, the congregation has been building out the meaning of Open and Affirming to include members of the LGBTQ+ community and beyond

You can make room for the couple whose marriage is failing, and for the couple whose marriage is just starting.

For the child who wails in church, for the older person whose dementia prevents them from following everything that is said, but who sings the hymns, and recognizes old friends.

For the person who has been transformed by the faith they found here, and the person still waiting for transformation.

For those who know who they are, and for those who are still figuring that out.

For those whose path in life is clear, and for those who are in a wilderness they never expected to encounter.

For Republicans and Democrats, for left leaning Republicans and right leaning Democrats; those who are confident in their politics, and those who still have questions.

Can you give them time? Space? Can you allow for growth and change? It is up to you to create safe space here. It is up to you to create safe space when you encounter someone who is different from you. We say we are open and affirming, but we each are the ones who make that so: in the decisions we make about who we welcome and who we avoid – how these judgments are used.

The fig tree was given another year, and some attention to help it to thrive.

This is very countercultural right now. I'm inviting you to behave differently from the culture around you. Facebook, politics, war, the pandemic, it has all been used to divide us and help us to pass quick judgments on each other – algorithms and advertising, oversharing and overhearing. What if we instead focused where Jesus does, on the humanity of those who are suffering. The Galileans Pilate slaughtered, those who had the tower in Siloam fall on them, they were human, just like us. Do not judge them for their misfortune. Do not judge them because they are dead. You've got some time, Jesus said, like the fig tree.

And in the end, Jesus goes ahead and illustrates his own sermon: healing on the sabbath, teaching in parables that resonate on many levels, and heading to Jerusalem in the last week of his life. Where he poured out his love for each and for all leading to his crucifixion. In the end, after the welcome, the judgment he passed on us all, is love.

Give it time.

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Congregational Church in South Glastonbury, 949 Main St., South Glastonbury, CT 06073