



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“When You Don’t Give a Fig...”

Luke 13:1-9

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This week I learned a new phrase, “I don’t give a fig.” It doesn’t mean what you might think! If your mind is wandering off, wander back; think about figs. “I don’t give a fig” refers specifically to a small, tasty fruit. If you don’t give a fig, you don’t care, not even a little, not even the size of a fig. I don’t give a fig means it doesn’t concern me.

Too often, crises in today’s world squash our caring. Violence is not new. What happened in New Zealand last week is shocking. But so was Pittsburgh last October. Gruesome stories happen in real time and they have happened throughout time. In recent days, there have been any number of crises – here are just a few – cyclones in Mozambique and Malawi, floods in Nebraska, and a college admissions scam. The scam hasn’t drawn literal blood, but to those going through college admissions, the whole process can feel like a crisis.

One way to cope is to disengage from the world’s pain and problems: to not give a fig.

In our gospel reading, people tell Jesus about what Pilate, the Roman governor, did in Jerusalem. He had some Galileans murdered while they were making animal sacrifices in the temple. Then, Pilate had the soldiers do something particularly awful. He had them mix the blood of the dead men with the blood of the animal sacrifices. To the faith community, the effect was like a crisis with flashing red lights. Pilate’s brutal threat to anyone considering rebellion against Rome.

In response, Jesus, could have revealed his political views about the Roman occupation. But he doesn’t bite. Instead, he asks a theological question, the question on everyone’s minds. Were the deaths of these Galileans related to their sins? In other words, should we blame the victims? He ploughs ahead and answers his own question – “No, I tell you.” Jesus rejects any connection between these brutal murders and the behavior of those who died.

Two weeks ago, in good weather with clear visibility, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crashed after takeoff, killing all 157 people onboard. In our day, such a disaster begs scientific questions. Investigators have the black box. All 737 Max 8’s sit, grounded until we know more. In our day, we don’t usually wonder if there is a connection between an airline catastrophe and the morality of the people on the plane. Some Christians of the fundamentalist sort might wonder. But, we don’t. We’re with Jesus on this one. Should we blame the victims? – “No, I tell you.”

Jesus brings up another tragic crisis from his day. What about the 18 people killed when a tower fell on them? Apparently, a portion of a city wall, containing a tower, collapsed. Maybe the work hadn’t been done to code. Maybe the materials were second rate. Jesus doesn’t blame the victims. As he often does, when people ask him about someone else, he says, “Look at yourself first.”

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did (Luke 13:5).

More sermons can be found online at <https://subsplash.com/broadstreetpresbyterian/sermons>

The warning still sounds stark today. Often, we receive news as entertainment. Meanwhile we dismiss the movie of our own lives – its plot, its characters, its meaning. We neglect our lives with God. During this season of Lent, these 40 days before Easter, we take time to consider what we want to let go of, what we want to grow into. Our Lenten journey offers an invitation to pay attention to our own lives, to go deeper, to get real.

Jesus moves from two tragic stories of crisis to tell a parable about a tree in crisis. A fig tree that's not giving a fig – literally. A fig tree that isn't producing any figs. The vineyard owner labels it a failure.

In the Bible, a vineyard is a familiar image for the community of Israel. The vineyard belongs to God and God sustains and cares for the vineyard. Part of that care is God calling the people to repent – to turn around, to believe that things can be different. In our parable, God's frustration peaks when those who should bear fruit don't give a fig.

The vineyard owner says to the gardener, "Cut the fig tree down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" But the gardener – the Jesus figure – wants to give the fig tree more time. The gardener suggests that the way forward isn't to destroy the tree, but to offer more nourishment – a chance to grow.

Sir, let the tree 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 (Luke 13:8-9).

The gardener's voice is urgent and full of hope. Let's see if it can give a fig... I'm not willing to give up on this tree. Give me a year. I'll dig, loosen the hard soil, and put manure on it. Our parable is so earthy. Preacher and teacher Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad grew up on a farm. She writes,

I know manure when I see it and smell it. Sometimes, if my father could convince us children to help, we'd load pitchforks full of manure from the barn into the manure spreader. Then I'd ride the tractor with Daddy, up and down through the field with manure shooting out behind us over the black soil. It wasn't my favorite job, but I knew it would help the corn grow.¹

Jesus the gardener refuses to give up on the vineyard. If manure is needed manure will be provided. These days, the vineyard is the whole earth. The vineyard is the church. And the vineyard is our lives. Jesus isn't giving up on any of us – you, me, the church, the whole earth. There's hope in this parable – don't cut the tree down. There's also urgency – give me one more year. As if Jesus is saying, "I desperately want the people of God to give a fig..."

Could this be the year? Could this be the Lent? Jesus will fertilize the tree. He'll loosen packed, hard soil. When our hearts are packed shut, when we think we're a waste of soil, God's Beloved One fertilizes us, especially when we don't think we deserve a second chance.

This year we've been composting at home. We've got biodegradable bags and a bin with a tight-fitting lid. We're composting in the easiest way possible – a driver empties our bin every week! By pick up day it smells. This composting process, it's a stinky business. Toward the end of the week there's a ripe smell every time I open the bin. Something is going on in there! Google tells me aerobic bacteria are breaking down the foods.² That process smells, as if to say there's no growth without stench, no newness without decomposition.

¹ <http://day1.org/638-could-this-be-the-year-for-figs>;

Thanks to the Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad for her sermon, which has provided inspiration for this sermon.

² <https://home.howstuffworks.com/composting1.htm>

All you gardeners out there know there's a difference between compost and fertilizer. Compost feeds the soil. Fertilizer feeds the plant. The gardener says "Don't cut the tree down. Let it alone for one more year. I'll do everything I can to bring this tree back to life. I will even give my life for the life of the world." Jesus will become the despised and rejected one, treated like compost, tossed out like trash. Executed on Golgotha, which literally was the city of Jerusalem's garbage dump. Out of tragedy, waste, death, God brings new life. This Beloved Jesus fertilizes us and offers us new life.

On Ash Wednesday, we looked at our lives: What do we want to let go of? Each week, this question shapes our Lenten Spiritual Practice in worship. It continues to spark meaningful conversation. Some of us want to let go of apathy. Apathy is a coping mechanism. When we don't give a fig, we protect ourselves from pain and interruption. Too much apathy can create a crisis, a crisis in society, a crisis in the fabric of democracy itself.

The opposite of apathy is engagement. We can't save people from airline crashes or change what happened to Muslims in New Zealand. But we can give a fig about racism and white privilege. We can give a fig about loving our neighbors as ourselves. We can volunteer, and vote. We can think twice before we spread information on social media. We can be kind and brave. We can speak up about what gives us hope, because many people feel hopeless. We can give a fig.

There is always a tension between our trying as individuals, and our not relying entirely on our own trying. We aren't saved by what we're able to do or not do. In today's baptism of toddler Addie, we've been reminded that God loves us beyond measure, no matter what. Gradually, more and more, that love is becoming the center of gravity in our lives. That love defines who we are and what we think of ourselves. That love roots in us and shapes our relationships with others and with all of creation, stretching, sprouting, blooming.

What I like most about this parable of the fig tree is that it isn't finished. It doesn't have an ending. We get to write the ending, with God. Every year, the gardener comes. "One more year," Jesus says, "I'll do everything I can to bring you, the church, the world, back to life so you can bear good fruit, I'll do everything I can, including giving my life for the world."

Who knows? Maybe this is the year for figs! Amen.