



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

What If Tomorrow Never Comes?

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 7, 2010

Third Sunday in Lent (Year C)

Luke 13:1-9

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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.' "

One of the best ways to pass the time while driving along back roads is to read the messages on church signs. Every now and then you come across something refreshingly honest, such as the one I saw a few weeks ago: "If you've been praying for snow, please stop."

Sometimes, it hits the profound—though not always obvious, like the one which reads, "If you ever do find the perfect church, you might not fit in."

Of course, the profound is hard to come by. Most often I find them humorous, and not just the ones that are meant to be. I have a great deal of fun trying to figure out the hidden double-meanings that are too common for so many of them.

One Friday afternoon several years ago now, I had to make my way to a retreat center near White Bluff, TN, where I was to spend the night and next day with a group of pastors from the presbytery I was in at the time. I decided to by-pass the construction and ended up taking some back roads. I remember thinking that I could have some fun inter-

preting the church signs along the way. But the only message I saw didn't make me laugh. In fact, it troubled me.

"Tomorrow may be too late." That's all there was. No hidden message. No profound piece of wisdom. I'll admit that I was a bit miffed. After all, here was some fringe church group with a wild name using an innocent church sign as a scare tactic. It bothered me, to tell you the truth. I thought with a bit of arrogance: "I'm glad we Presbyterians are more sophisticated."

But then another thought hit me. "Of course, if that sign's right, do I really want to spend my last day and night with a bunch of fuddy-duddy ministers, listening to hours of lecture on the challenge of ministry in these changing times?" My last day and night with a group of ministers? No, it can't be!

So I went back to a more comforting thought. "What a weird church. I'm glad we're not like that."

But, when I read this passage from Luke's gospel, I can't help but come to another conclusion. Jesus could belong to a church with a sign like that. In fact, he could have written it.

Luke tells us that some people came up to Jesus to tell him about what they'd seen on CNN over the last week. It seems some people had gone to the Temple to offer their sacrifices, but they had been killed in the Temple itself. They were killed by the Romans. Jesus had just been teaching about repentance and judgment, and so these folks probably thought they were giving Jesus a great example of what that judgment looks like.

So Jesus, understanding their motivations, begins to respond: "Do you think these people suffered in this way were worse sinners than all other people?" And then Jesus reminds them about an earlier incident when a tower had fallen on some other people and killed them. "Were they worse sinners?" asked Jesus.

That's where Jesus got us off track a bit. He led me to believe at one point that the story and the parable which follows are about what we are to make of suffering, innocence, and sin. But that wasn't Jesus' point at all. This was: "I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

No, he didn't want us to have a theological discussion about the suffering of the innocent; he wanted us to recognize the frailty of human life, and of our need to repent—to turn to God—now. In very real ways, Jesus echoes the message of the church that I had dismissed as being a bit strange: "Tomorrow may be too late."

Now, I know that can be totally misread. If it's used as a scare tactic to increase the numbers on church rolls, it's totally out of context. That runs along the lines of there being no atheists in fox holes. Jesus' call to repentance isn't based on the fear of death nearly as much as it rests on the promise of life—not just some distant life but life in the here and now. What Jesus is doing by reminding us of the frailty of life is inviting us to live in the kingdom now, to become a part of that alternative community which is ordered by what God directs, even the kingdom of God. Jesus isn't trying to scare us to death but rather to invite us to live life to its fullest.

A friend of mine was telling me about a rabbi who was teaching his students. He said to them: "A person should repent the day before he dies."

“But, teacher,” they said, “a person has no idea when they will die. It could be any day.”

“That’s right. Therefore all life should be one of repentance.”

Do you remember how this season of Lent began: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” When Christians throughout the world entered the season of lent through the service of Ash Wednesday, that’s what was said over us as we received the mark of ashes. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” It’s a biblical way of describing the frailty of human life.

In his parable about the fig tree which wasn’t producing, Jesus hammers home the truth: “Tomorrow may be too late, but now isn’t.”

The very fact that people hear this parable show that it’s not a message of death but an invitation to repentance and life. Here’s a chance to re-commit our lives to participating in the kingdom of God today, by righting wrongs, by working for justice, by feeding the hungry, by offering forgiveness, and by doing the countless other things that Jesus did and which the church continues to do in his name. As the character in a movie once said, “There’s no such thing as too late; that’s what they invented death for.” As long as you’ve got breath to breathe, it’s not too late to live in the kingdom of God.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote in his journal that “the days come and go like muffled and veiled figures sent from a distant friendly party, but they say nothing, and if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them as silently away.”

The days that pass say nothing to us. So we must remind each other in the church in the name of God: “Repent, and live in the kingdom.”

Most of you are probably familiar with the common image of the church’s proclamation as sowing the seed of the gospel. Today, however, Jesus invites us to consider that it’s not seed we’re sowing, but rather that we’re simply spreading the manure in the hope that what has been planted before will take root and grow. So, here’s hoping.