

FIG-URE IT  
[written in oral form]

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:6-9  
Lent 3, Year C

March 24, 2019  
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When I proudly told Leslie the sermon title and its meaning, she paused and then responded, "That's not funny."

I replied, "It's not suppose to be funny, but once I tell people what it means, it should prompt a smile or a grin."

She commented, "Oh, you may get a sympathetic smirk."

Well,.....I went with it anyway.

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Sometimes, we disregard differing opinions.  
Sometimes, we see only what we want to see, and ignore the rest.  
Usually, we read the feed we like, and block countering opinions.  
This seems to be what is happening with the SNC-Lavalin affair.

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We didn't read the Isaiah passage, but it's in the bulletin.  
The opening words in the Isaiah text are very enticing, but that's just the beginning.  
It states, food and drinks are free.  
God's buying, and not just the cheap stuff.  
Verse 2 states, "Delight yourselves in rich food."

However, reading on suggests that God's people have to share their bounty with others.  
I suppose that's not too bad, as long as God is picking up the tab.  
A Facebook post would either end here, or begin in verse 6, depending on your "like" tendencies.  
Verse 6 and following verses, would make many of us uncomfortable.

In all honesty, we often treat the Bible like a buffet potluck--we pick and choose what we like for ourselves, and gloss over the rest. Sometimes, we selectively pick uncomfortable verses to throw at others.

This is illustrated by the elderly lady who shook hands with the pastor after the service one Sunday morning, and commented, "That was a wonderful sermon-- just wonderful. Everything you said applies to someone I know."

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Here is the distasteful part:

Verse 6 advises that it's a limited time offer, stating: "Seek the Lord while God may be found." I hope that it is NOT God who drifts away....out of sight, but it doesn't say.

This does not sound like today's theme of a life giving drink. ??

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Verse 7 is some tough gristle about being welcoming and inviting to the unrighteous / to not create barriers for them,..... so that God can be merciful to them.

This is similar to how God treated the people of Nineveh, much to Jonah's chagrin.

This is a reminder that we are not to judge and categorize people.

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I must confess, I find it hard to wish the best for certain political leaders.

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Then verses 8 and 9 puts us all in our place by reminding us that we are not so smart / we don't own the truth, nor really understand the ways of God.

I think "our truth" / what we assume to be truth is just a fraction of the ultimate truth--God. We have much to learn.

Therefore, church needs to be a place to wrestle with questions and doubts, including adventuresome theology. Church must be a safe place to doubt, stumble and search.

Hearing comforting, familiar words or sermons about what we already know and believe in ....will not help us grow in truth or in faith. Let us build on what we have learned, and with faith go forward, always living into the unknown.

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Still,..... it sure would be nicer to only focus on the opening verses about free, yummy food.

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The Luke text begins with a similar reprimand.

Jesus was talking with a group of people, and some of them mentioned a terrible incident that had recently occurred.

The horrific incident was about the Galileans who were killed in the temple by Pilate while they were preparing their animals for sacrifice.

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Galilee had the reputation as a breeding ground for revolutionaries, and the assumption presented was that the Galileans Got What They Deserved.

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Jesus strongly counters that accusation and age old myth that bad things happen to bad people as punishment,... and that good benefits are proof that a person is good.

That attitude is judgmental and arrogant, and so Jesus calls them to repent. We must **Not** divide with labels, such as good or bad people.

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Jesus continued by citing another horrific event where 18 people were killed when a water tower fell on them. He added that same message as before--denying the correlation of the bad thing to a bad person, and again calls those around him to repent.

They needed to repent because there were being elitists. Isaiah said the same thing. They were not being accepting and gracious to those who are different, to those they dislike or detest.

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Jesus was trying to debunk the simple logic of you get what you deserve. That logic is the basis of Prosperity Theology, which declares, "I'm doing well, so God loves me." or "I'm safe and healthy, so God loves me." It also proclaims "winners are better."

Moreover, the arrogant devaluation of others who are in another tribe is the foundation for racism and bigotry.

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We all may be tainted by the over simplification of "You reap what you sow". Life isn't so sterile and simple, and we may not know all the details.

For example: Josephus, the ancient historian, wrote that those deaths were the result of Pilate's counter revolutionary activities. Pilate behaved ruthlessly. He had a propensity for killing Galileans, which includes Jesus.

In the year 35, Rome finally removed Pilate from power because of his extreme brutality.

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The fallen water tower was Not an innocent accident.

Pilate was stealing money from the temple to build a 200 furlong aqueduct. The Judeans were very upset by this.

Still, most kept quiet, not wanting to risk their lot in life and retirement plan, as is typical today.

Some brave souls decided to do something about Pilate's injustices. They practiced civil disobedience in the form of sabotaging the construction. Josephus wrote that Pilate sent troops to deal with the sedition.

The Roman soldiers chased away most of the protesters and killed the rest.

The water tower "accident" was likely NOT an accident, but a mass murder.

[The Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18, Chapter 3, paragraph 2: The Works of Josephus.]

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When people are safe, cozy and in the dominate culture, it is easy to be arrogant and judgmental.

To All of those, Jesus called to repentance and presented this story:

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A man had a fig tree planted--the fig tree was there because of the man.

It was His vineyard. He owned it, and periodically checked production, too.

And, he was keenly aware a one problem tree--a tree that was Not bearing fruit.

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Fig trees are an interesting fruit tree, and so is the fruit --the fig.

The edible fig tree is one of the first plants that were cultivated by humans.

Moreover, Figs are one of the highest plant sources of calcium and fiber. Dried figs are rich in fiber, copper, manganese, magnesium, potassium, calcium, and vitamin K.

And, Figs can be eaten fresh or dried, and used in jam-making.

Even more fascinating, is the symbiotic role a very tiny wasp plays. The wasp, only 1.5 mm, enters the flower pod, and lays its eggs. In the process, it carried in pollen that fertilizes the fig flower pod.

The eggs hatch, and the little grubs tunnel their way out, but the mother wasp dies in the fig. The wasp is absorbed by the fig as nourishment.

Eating a fig is indirectly, eating a wasp. Pretty cool, eh?

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The tree itself, is significant in size. The common Fig tree grows to 25-35 feet high .....and as wide. It takes up a lot of room and nourishment --resources.

In a way, fig trees are somewhat like humans.

The tree will shade out anything growing beneath it, and the roots are greedy, traveling far beyond the tree canopy--reaching out 50 feet and more from the trunk. They can tolerate drought, but will suck up lots of water when available.

Obviously, a fig tree that is not bearing fruit is occupying a lot of space, for no reason, and stealing resources from others.

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So, bearing fruit is essential,.... for a number of reasons.

To be sure, the vineyard owner desires that his plants, at least give an equal return for the investment. It's the owner's prerogative, whether we like it or not, to judge his own trees.

It is generally understood that the owner represents God.

We like to think God plays by our rules, but as the Isaiah passage pointed out, we are not so wise, nor are we the keeper of God.

And, as mentioned, an unproductive fig tree is a drain on others and the environment in general.

In addition, there is a deeper reason for the necessity to bear fruit.

Fruit contains seed, and that means the survival of the species.

One tree is not the whole world. It is part of a whole.

A tree takes up space and resources for the sake of its specie's future and so that others can live--those who consume the fruit.

A selfish, unproductive fig tree is actually in the dying process, already, and in the killing process, too, by not feeding others.

Real living is giving as much or more than we take in.

I think that dynamic is in the way of God.

As Fredrick Buechner said,

To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake - even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death - that little by little we start to come alive.”

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In the parable, the owner is ready to cut down the tree.

The gardener intercedes, and begs for one more year....hoping he can stimulate the tree to start living / to bear fruit.

Most believe that the gardener represents Jesus.

The gardener will nurture, feed.....and dig around it. Digging around it suggests the gardener plans to do some root pruning.

Root pruning is cutting off a few feeder roots, and doing that can shock a fruit tree into bearing fruit.  
Being stressed can force it to flower.  
This doesn't always work,... but it often does.

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We'd prefer to focus on the aspect of a second chance / that God is merciful; however, like it or not,.....  
all things come to an end.  
And, that end comes sooner for those who are not living / for those who are self absorbed, judgmental  
and not giving.

To be sure, living is much more than just the physical aspect.

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The one year warning, is grace,.... but it also serves as a root pruning to wake up and start living.

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This parable is capable of hooking us in various ways, thus the title:

Figure it..... which includes,.... Fig.... you are..... it.

Get it..? You are a Fig. Fig ....ure... it.

Okay,..... it isn't such a great title. At first, I thought it was when the bulletin went to print.....

Expanding on the ways this parable reaches us:

The tree is part of the whole. The fig / the fruit is part of the tree, and the fruit does more than just give  
new life for its species.

The fruit also nourishes others, any one, without discrimination.

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This story is an obvious call to repent, by tacitly asking, "Are we bearing fruit?"

Are we giving / enabling / returning **more** than we are taking?

Do we freely offer ourselves? Are we as a life giving drink?

Are we gracious and accepting to all people?

Or are we protective, self serving and judgmental?

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Does the life and message of Jesus cut us to the core?

Does the life and message of Jesus cut us to the core?

If we do not sense that, then we either have it all together... or we are in serious trouble.

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In addition, a fruit tree and a gardener live in a complex world, a world that includes seasons.

There is a season to be dormant, a season to bud and branch out, a season to bear fruit and a season to  
take in and store up reserves.

There is no shame in being where God wants us to be, whatever season that is.

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May God grant each of us the wisdom to figure out which season we are to be in and when that season  
ends.