



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

November 11, 2012

"Don't Get Bent Out Of Shape" (Gospel of Luke Series)

Ron Mathieu

This morning we continue in our series on the Gospel of Luke with Chapter 13:

Luke 13:1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Luke 13:2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

Luke 13:3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Luke 13:4 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?"

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

Luke 13:6 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.

Luke 13:7 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?"

Luke 13:8 He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

Luke 13:9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

May God bless the reading of His Word.

So by now, most of you are familiar with how I get anxious when I've been asked to preach. Some of this morning's reading is hard to understand, so I decided to go right to Pastor Dan and asked for some help with my assigned passage. We read it together, and he looked up and said, "Heck if I know what you can say!"

But in fairness, he pointed at a wall full of commentaries and gave me permission to use all of them. And then, being the good shepherd that he really is, we talked through some approaches I might consider, and he sent me some very helpful reference material. So if you like this sermon, tell him he coached well, but if you don't, it's all my fault!

Eighteen months ago we embarked on a capital campaign called "Upon This Rock," and we are so thankful for the sacrificial contributions many of you have and continue to make. I'm pleased to announce that as a result, we've been able to increase our parking capacity; we're able to do and are in the middle of a major green project retrofitting LED lighting throughout the campus; and we've reduced our debt by nearly one million dollars since last November. Praise God!

But I also have some bad news. We are on state conservation land. Using his executive powers, the governor has authorized the State of Hawaii to take a significant portion of what you've donated to our church to finance a much-needed water improvement project in the city of Kaneohe.

If you're like me, you're thinking, "He can't do that! Especially with funds that were donated to the church!"

And you're right; he can't, and he didn't.

But according to Scottish theologian William Barclay, that's exactly what Pilate historically did in the two obscurely referenced events that led up to this morning's Scripture reading.

Just about that time Pilate decided that Jerusalem needed a new and improved water supply. He proposed to build it and to finance it with Temple monies. It was in everyone's best interests to go forward with the project, but at the very idea of spending Temple monies like that, the Jews got all bent out of shape.

When they gathered to protest, Pilate instructed his soldiers to mingle with them, wearing cloaks over their battle dress for disguise, and to carry clubs instead of swords. At a given signal they were to fall on the mob and disperse them.

But the soldiers dealt with the mob with violence far beyond their instructions, and a considerable number of people lost their lives.

Similarly for the eighteen men who died when the tower of Siloam fell, the Jews who were questioning Jesus were connecting the popular idea that suffering is judgment for sin. Like when Job's friends were sure his suffering was a result of something he must have done.

We hear about tragedies every day in the news, and many wonder, "Is this God's anger or punishment?" I recently heard such comments when there was an earthquake, tsunami, and the largest superstorm in memory all striking America in close succession. I know for a fact it crossed more than one person's mind in this room. You might be thinking, "People don't really think that today," but they do.

My wife's mother was severely stricken by polio when she was in her 20s, and on more than one occasion (once by a pastor) she was told that it was because of sin in her life that she had been afflicted with that crippling disease!

So Jesus is asked, "Didn't these guys deserve what happened to them?" And as He so often does, Jesus turns the question back on the questioners. He answers, "You should be more concerned about the judgment that will fall on you! Unless you repent you will all perish just as they did."

The word repent is one of those words that I've never been comfortable with, probably because of the doomsday evangelism that was popular when I was younger. Do any of you remember those guys on the corner with signs?

People who said, "Repent," bothered me, like "prepare to meet thy maker" bothered Pastor Sim. And like Pastor Sim, I didn't want to know those people. I didn't want to be like those people, and I sure as heck didn't want to preach on the subject!

But once I got further on my faith walk and hooked onto the meaning of repent, which is literally to "turn around and go the other way," it really calibrated my thinking and behavior.

In the 70s we lived in Sardinia, a beautiful island in the middle of the Mediterranean. In the northwestern corner of Sardinia, there is a remote headland called Capo Testa. There was only one road leading into Capo Testa, and as a result, only one road leading out.

Whether you drove for minutes or hours to get there, people who didn't know better discovered that the only way they could avoid a dead end in their journey was by turning around.

The Bible tells us again and again this is what's required to discover the right path in our lives. We first have to completely change direction in order to replace a "dead-end" with a path that leads to a destination where death has lost its sting. No matter how far along the wrong path we travel, there comes a single point when we are suspended between continuing or changing direction.

That first step we take in the other direction is called repentance. So in our passage, Jesus first decouples the idea that individual suffering is a sign of judgment. The people who died in those incidents, the people who died in Hurricane Sandy, people who are stricken with cancer, or lose their jobs, or are going through tough times not of their own making are **NO WORSE THAN ANYONE ELSE**. The rain falls on the just

and the unjust alike (Matthew 5:45). The truth is we all sin and fall short of what God would have us be.

Even so, Jesus uses their question to ask "But why do you look for the splinter in their eye but ignore the 2' by 4' in your own? If you don't repent, it's inevitable that you will also perish!"

And He tells a parable to help us go beyond the simple message that whether we suffer catastrophe or not, we all need to change direction.

Luke 13:6 A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any.

Luke 13:7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

Luke 13:8 'Sir,' the man replied, 'Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it.'

Luke 13:9 'If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Having said we all need to change direction toward God, Jesus gives a clear warning that choosing the dead-end path leads to just that: death in the end. We shouldn't judge, for that's God's role. But make no mistake, judgment will come! We are not only given the opportunity but also the expectation to flourish and bear fruit.

What kind of fruit are we expected to bear? Well, if we insist on our own way, the way of the world (the dead-end path), Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians what results. This is how Eugene Peterson translates in The Message:

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.” (Galatians 5:19-21)

Then he contrasts it with the kind of fruit that are inevitable if we follow Jesus:

“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

The Bible makes it very clear that there is a choice, that it’s ours to make, and there are consequences in this life and the next if we choose wrongly, or not at all. And to those of us who procrastinate, remember: doing nothing is as much a choice as doing the wrong thing! American actor Will Rogers said, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there!”

Fortunately, Jesus knows it’s our human nature to procrastinate in

choosing to follow Him. In the parable, the Master says:

Luke 13:7 ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

St Augustine put it this way: “God has promised forgiveness for your repentance, but He hasn’t promised tomorrow if you procrastinate.” (Augustine: Works and Biography)

Wow, this parable is packed with warnings, but it’s also lit with the promise of grace. The gardener replies to his master:

Luke 13:8 ‘Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.

Luke 13: 9 ‘If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’

This parable really resonates with me. Our small garden is a beautiful oasis. Angela and I love to tend it, and it’s a blessing to be able to enjoy its tranquil beauty. For the British, such magic with gardens is in their genes. Me, I dig where Angela tells me to.

Five years ago we planted an avocado tree, and with great anticipation (and I might add disappointment), we watched for three years as it pathetically struggled to survive. It grew to about five feet, and then the top shriveled and died. The leaves browned and curled as if they were embarrassed by the way the tree looked, and they wanted to cover it up. Every time I looked at it, I threatened to cut it down. But Angela suggested we wait another year, and to my surprise, it produced a couple of undersized avocados that imitated petrified plums. Encouraged, we renewed our efforts, watering and fertilizing more, and this year it has produced five beautiful, full-sized fruit!

I couldn’t help but think of this parable. I also realized that this is how

God gives us second and third and fourth chances. He places people in our path to nurture our faith, and His joy—like ours with the avocados—abounds in the harvest!

I’m here to tell you that we worship a God of second chances. If you’re like me who needs second chances, then in addition to knowing that God will judge, it’s important to know He is also patient and forgiving. So don’t give up too soon! Patience and forbearance themselves are gifts of the Spirit, the kind of gifts God waits for us to develop.

But we tend to write people off too soon, especially our kids. I believe this tendency increased when we moved away from being an agricultural society. Farmers plant with a vision of harvesting a crop, a hope of reaping what they have sown, and then they patiently wait.

Being thoroughly modern, on the other hand, most of us look for immediate gratification or immediate results. We tend to write people and investments off quickly. And we write ourselves off, too!

So we need to learn to be more patient, to wait on God. Pastor and author John Ortberg says, “Biblically, waiting is not something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be.”

When we show such patience with others, it’s love. When we have such patience with ourselves, it’s hope. And when we have such patience with God, it’s faith. So let’s look at what we’ve covered so far:

1) Bad things happen to good and bad people alike.

If you are going through tough times, it's not because you fall short or sin. We all do. It's in our nature.

2. Don't judge others; look to how you live your own life. And if we give an honest look, we all find that our lives are not as fruitful as they could be.

3. Listen up! We have been given warning. We have a clear choice to have it our way or God's way. A time will come when it's too late to make that choice. If you're going to repent, do it soon, because you don't know how soon it might be too late!

4. We have also been given a promise. We're going to mess up. God knows this. He gives us second chances, not because we earn them or deserve them. In fact we can never be good enough, we can never earn enough, we can never deserve the high ransom that was paid to free us from Sin. God sacrificed His Son Jesus so that no matter how bad we've been, no matter how long we've delayed, we have a Savior and a chance to change before it's too late.

5. God's delays are not God's denials. We have to learn patience.

Continuing in verse 10, Luke closes the loop on this discussion of God's judgment and grace:

Luke 13:10 On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues,

Luke 13:11 And a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.

Luke 13:12 When Jesus saw her, He called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity."

Luke 13:13 Then He put His hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Luke 13:14 Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

This is the last time we see Jesus in a synagogue, and one of seven episodes when the Bible tells of Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath. Well, duh! Not once or twice or four or five, but SEVEN times we learn of Jesus taking on "religious" people by purposefully breaking the strict laws of Sabbath behavior.

Does God think we're slow? Surely Jesus doesn't think that our church, or those of us who are carefully following the Bible, those of us who go to church every week, tithe faithfully and attend classes and small group need reminding that legalistic behavior can get in the way of true repentance. Probably not us. But for all those other people, Luke includes this seventh story, the story of a lady who has been bent out of shape for eighteen years, to help us understand more about God's judgment, grace, and the kind of fruit He's looking for.

I love the way this story is juxtaposed with the parable of the fig tree, a warning that we have to make the right choice while we still have the chance. The synagogue leader gets all bent out of shape after Jesus chooses not to heal on one of the six other days of the week but rather on the Sabbath when such "work" was not allowed.

I bet the synagogue leader was thinking, "Hah! I'll get you on this one, Jesus!" Actually, although upset with Jesus, he doesn't even have the "hoozpa" to take Jesus on directly. Instead, he blames the bent-over lady

for not coming to be healed on one of the other six days of the week!

I wanted to scream "Hey, you guys watched this lady for nearly two decades and judged she must be a sinner. That's almost 6,000 other days besides the Sabbath that you could have shown compassion!"

It's no mistake that Luke places this story right after He tells of other religious people who wanted to point their judgmental finger at those killed by Pilate. He's indicating that whenever we feel holier than others, there should be a loud alarm that tells us to first look at ourselves.

And if you're reaction to this episode is "What jerks! What kind of a church would find it weird to hold a healing service on Sunday morning," I would caution that we, too, live in an age when grace is not always our strong suit, or when legalism can reign supreme.

In this highly charged and closely contested political season, battleground states such as Wisconsin were inundated 24/7 with political ads, polls, and phone calls. But wasn't it interesting that in late October, during the airing of the Green Bay Packers football games, neither political party made any robo-calls or aired any political ads? The unwritten but universally understood rule was that not even politics would take a Cheesehead away from the TV when the Packers are on!

Well, in Galilee, the Sabbath was almost as holy as Packers game day in Wisconsin. Obeying the law regarding the Sabbath was so sacrosanct that showing compassion broke the rules. Jesus knows that even when we have chosen a good path, it's in our sinful nature to look down on others not with compassion, but with judgment.

This is not the fruit He's looking for. God commands us to forgive, not to judge.

So as our passage continues in verse 15, Jesus highlights their hypocrisy and catches them on a legal technicality:

Luke 13:15 "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?"

Luke 13:16 Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

Friends, this is good news! Jesus not only hammers home that we should likewise be compassionate, but underscores that God's grace is freely given according to His schedule and timing.

This is why we have to remind ourselves again and again that First Prez is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. It's why our core value of striving for excellence means giving our best effort to God, not being perfect. It's why we believe different art forms can be used in worshipping God. It's why we sponsor more than a thousand Compassion kids. We have been given so much more than we deserve, and we should consider it a privilege to share it with others. And it's totally amazing how God uses such grace.

Many of you know Michelle Tolentino, the Filipina girl who grew up in abject poverty. But through a Compassion sponsor's generosity, her life was transformed in Jesus' name.

She went on to college in Compassion's Leadership Development Program, and was the first Compassion child to get a Master's Degree from "Don't Get Bent Out Of Shape" by Ron Mathieu

Moody Bible Institute. All through the grace of a sponsor (in Connecticut), like hundreds of you.

Michelle grew up in an incredibly poor area where many of her friends have turned to prostitution in order to support themselves or their families. Last week we spent some time with her as she was passing through Hawaii, and it was a joy to learn more about how she is sharing the grace she received. Michelle now heads a non-profit in Manila called Made in Hope, a shelter that rescues women from the sex-trade and liberates them physically, emotionally, economically, and spiritually.

This is the power of grace. Michelle was given a second chance, and in turn is bearing good fruit. The ladies she saves have been given another season, brought out of being "ladies of the night" into the light of God's grace.

Like so many poor people, who even to this day are often judged as being poor because they did something wrong, Michelle and her ladies are living proof of God's promise in Michelle's life verse:

Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I look out in this room and know that many of you are facing things that take a long time. I know more than one father who longs with all his heart to have a better relationship with his son. Some of you have suffered with illnesses for longer than 18 years. Some are dealing with unquiet minds that no one knows or sees or could even comprehend the pain. Perhaps you carry guilt for wrongs you have committed to others, or just feel at a dead-end in your life.

The truth is, most of us are bent over or bent out of shape in one way or another. But God offers a clear choice: He gave His Son in ransom for the way we all fall short. He gives us the free choice to repent, to turn around and follow His Son. Whether a crooked body or a crooked path, Jesus offers to straighten us out.

God wants us, all of us—you and you and you—each and every one of us, to feel His grace. And when we do, we may still suffer, but He gives us His Holy Spirit to guide and to counsel, to heal and to give hope, to nurture and fertilize us to bear the good fruit of that Spirit such fruit as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And Paul concludes in Galatians as I do now: "*Against such things there is no law.*" (Galatians 5:23)

Amen? Amen. Let's pray: O God of second chances and new beginnings, here I am again. Give me discernment to repent, patience to wait for Your perfect timing, compassion to give second chances, courage to break rules if necessary, and praise and thanksgiving to the source of all our grace. Amen.

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