

Luke 13:1-9  
Psalm 63  
Isaiah 55:1-9  
Lent 3/C

## Sermon - March 7, 2010.

For a while, it shocked me as a new minister, that the place I most often racist and sexist jokes was at the visitation at the funeral home, and it seemed the more traumatic the death, the worse the jokes. It took me a while to realize that the racist and sexist jokes were a pathetic attempt to impose order on the most disorderly thing in our human lives: suffering and death. Fred might have died in an accident at the mill, but our social structures – enforced by offensive jokes – our social structures still hold.

When the earthquake struck Haiti, televangelist Pat Robertson was quick to impose his own kind of order on this most disorderly event in nature. You may recall Robertson said the people of Haiti brought God's punishment on themselves, for the long-ago "sin" of refusing to be slaves any more and overthrowing the social order of French colonialism back in 1791. I don't know if Robertson has made any similar claims about Chile's recent earthquake.

It seems our human need for order is at least as old as the Bible, for in Luke's gospel today, we have people asking Jesus about the meaning behind two disasters – one political, one accidental, both resulting in loss of life. Pat Robertson, like the folks who brought their questions to Jesus, has projected his own need for order onto God. It's a very human need – that's why we like murder mysteries and television shows like *Law and Order* (note the second word in that show's name: order!) – we like these entertainments because they are little morality plays. The bad guys get caught and punished.

The challenge of our faith is to put that need for order aside and to embrace something else. And that something else is in the story of the argument over the fig tree. The landowner shows up one day, and questions his hired hand, the gardener, about the fig tree in the vineyard, a fig tree that is not producing any figs. Hasn't produced any figs for three years. It's a waste of space, a waste of soil, a waste of resources: cut it down! The gardener, hired by the landowner for knowledge the landowner himself does not have, intervenes on behalf of the fig tree – give it more time, give it some manure, give it more time. Give it a second chance.

God's love is not Tough Love, but a love that is patient with us. God's love is a love that gives us the gift of time. God has the patience to hang in with us; like the gardener, God doesn't give up on us but gives us the gift of time.

The parable of the fig tree put me in mind of one of the Olympic dramas that played out on our television screens recently: the first Olympic gold won by a Canadian on Canadian soil. Alex Bilodeau, men's moguls. Alex credited his older brother, Frederick, as his inspiration. Frederick has cerebral palsy, which means he might take longer than some of us temporarily-able-bodied people to do certain physical tasks. Frederick gave his younger brother Alex the gifts of determination, perseverance, but likely something more – the gift of going slower, the gift of patience. Not all of us bear fruit on the same frenzied schedule, or even on demand.

The story Jesus told doesn't have a conclusion. We don't know if the gardener was able to help the fig tree produce figs. And if he didn't, we don't know if the landowner came back and raised the question again, and if he did, we don't know the result of that

conversation. But we do know God's love is patient. We do know God gives us second chances.

This is disorderly, messy as manure. We are used to a certain moral economy in the world: you mess things up, we'll mess you up; you screw up, you will pay the consequences. God's way is disorderly, messy as manure – a wild, messy, open-armed love that gives us the generous gift of time, a love that gives us the gift of God's own confidence in each one of us that we will do something good in our lives, that we will bear fruit. This is disorderly, messy as manure. This is God's patient love for us. May we embrace it. Amen.

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