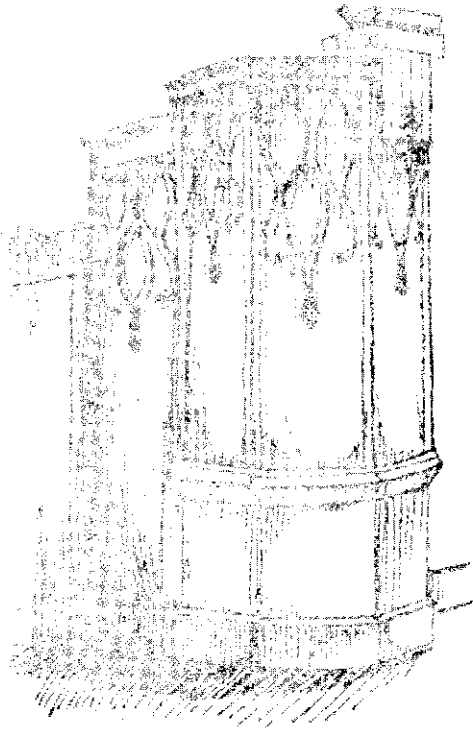


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# The Southminster Pulpit

"CAN YOU LET IT WAIT ANOTHER YEAR?"



Text: "And he answered him, 'Let it alone this year...if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Luke 13:8-9

December 31, 1978

Holy Communion

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One thing that has changed over the past decades in Christian preaching is what I will call a softer approach of the preacher to the people of the pew. Our times are not easily adapted to preachments. That might create a twitter among you or a sigh of relief, but it indicates something far deeper in the movements of our times. We are in an ego-centered age. We are looking primarily for the fulfillment of ourselves. For the most part, we seek corroboration of what we think, and seldom throw away a pet idea. We celebrate our individual right to go where we want, and get there when we want to, and do what we want to when we finally get there. One person standing up to tell others what they should be doing does not easily fit that self-expanding image. Hellfire and Damnation sermons disappeared from respectable pulpits more than a generation ago. And ever since, we have been on a rage of "dialogical encounter", we call it, over the truth of God, as if somehow the only way that truth could be discovered was in a dialogue, that the straightforward declaration of Christian truth - take it or leave it - and, more especially the declaration of the word of God from his Scripture, does not take life until somehow it is mulled over and ruminated by a group of people, or at least two. And the classic Christian preaching, on which the faith has risen or fallen through the centuries, some think anyway, is rather archaic and misses the mark. Few of us are any longer willing to be told anything, and maybe worse, fewer are willing to tell it.

So, I run the risk of sounding like an old-fashioned Victorian or an archdisciplinarian of the old school. And yet I take the risk, for a curious anomaly develops in the creation of my art - preaching, that is. These days those who

preach are taught to organize effectively, to argue persuasively, to relate to the people - even at times to manipulate them gently in the right direction, hoping they will respond and get the point. But all the while, I know I never learned much from those who were the easiest on me. I learned from those - parents, teachers, and friends - who made demands on me, and who held out an almost impossible goal for me to reach.

And more, I find people of every theological persuasion, and educational background, of all races and both sexes and all ages, and running the whole gamut of every kind of difference, all of us seeking for more than we have. And my old buddy Billy Graham, or Oral Roberts, or countless others, can still stand up with the most elementary kind of "This is what you have to believe...Here's what you can hold on to...Repent of your sins and everything will be changed for good..." They can lay it straight, and from the oldest executive to the youngest teenager, almost everybody rises to say "Amen" and marches to the front of all the various stadia all over the world to say, "Yes, Billy, I believe in you because you believe in Christ." The incredible rising of the various evangelical and charismatic movements of our day, burgeoning like wildfire all across the country, is responsive to this point. And worse, a pitiful ennui characterizes huge portions of those who miss it and who form sub-groups in the land. We need something to believe in, and someone to give our lives to.

All of that together goes to make a single point. The established church needs to relate once more in theological terms to the people in its pews, to be convincing and uncompromising in its declaration of what the Gospel is and what the Gospel now demands. One British theologian I know personally characterized the message from the

American pulpit as "You should try to do better." Of course you should, but people try and don't succeed. Dr. Menninger warned us years ago that in giving up on the words and symbols of sin and repentance, we have deprived the believer of one of the most basic and elementary supports of the Christian faith. We really think we like to be entertained and teased and jostled a bit maybe, and once in a while to feel sorry for the sinful self; but we need to be relieved of the greater burden of ourselves, a radical removal of the obstacles which lie on the road to what it means to be a loving servant of the Lord. What we should be doing is exploding those obstacles to smithereens when able, and chopping, hacking, chipping away anything, everything we can in this progressive, materialistic, dialectic culture which impedes our progress in the Kingdom, and clear the path for God's own Word and His small, lost and often-abandoned children to move them down the glory road to Kingdom Come.

That's not light and very humorous, to be sure; but at the end of this Year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Seventy Eight, in a year when the excesses of cultic practices have hit hardest when we felt it was finally easing and going away; in a year when the hopes and disappointments all around the globe marched hand in hand, the latter probably winning; when pressures on our young people are rising, to say nothing of pressure on parents; in a year which had so much potential to move us forward, but which comes in uncertain and zero gain at the least...Well, as we come to this Communion moment, this Holy Sacrament, I have chosen to end it here on a kind of somber note, to impress upon us all - myself included, to be sure - that the demands of our Gospel with all its Good News, one week following the pleasantness of Christmas...Well, we can gaze at the cradle too

long. The demands are radical. The road to Bethlehem is still the road to Calvary. Mary is warned that her son will be rejected, his demands will be too great upon those who seek an easy course in life. When Christ tells us he gave his body and his blood for us, which is what this Sacrament surely is about, then we leave the gaiety and fun and frivolous meanderings to a later time this New Year's Eve, and take a look this morning at one portion of the Scripture which mangles our light-hearted attempts to be happy and carefree, optimistic, good little children of the Lord, and to equate good Christianity with a syrupy nonchalance about how much God loves you and me and how he understands why we are the way we are.

Our text is one of those Scripture lessons which took hold of me, rather than my taking hold of it. It's the Parable of the Fig Tree in Luke 13, which I read in your hearing a few moments ago. It surely does not rank with the other majestic parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. It's a small, out of the way little statement that is often confused, for it overlaps with the condemnation of the fig tree as Christ moves on Palm Sunday morning towards Jerusalem, which seems ridiculously juvenile and arbitrary; but here in Luke, it follows on the heels of a call to repentance:

"Unless you repent, you will likewise perish", Jesus says. Hardly a way to "win friends and influence people". In our determination to make a loving humanist of Jesus, to make him sweet and gentle and kind, to emphasize his loving kindness and the tender mercy of his unlimited forgiveness - 70 times 70 for a beginning, we like to remember - we then promptly forget, because it's easier, we choose not to recall that he was also stern and straightforward and demanding and totally, even outrageously and

wholeheartedly and unilaterally throwing away his life on behalf of the Kingdom in which he believed with all his heart and soul and strength and mind. We forget, too, that according to his teaching, some sins, or at least one, can never be forgiven, and that we, as responsible human beings, are required to appear before him on the final Judgment Day to account for the way and ways in which we have used the gift of life and lived the passage of our days.

I was impressed the other night when I was told about an interview with Dr. Kubler-Ross, the authority on death and dying, a marvelous interview that was recommended to me by a friend. Dr. Ross was saying that in every case where a human being had been clinically dead and then returned; in every case, she said, there was some reference to going back through the years to have someone help that person to relive the experience of life. And, while it could be far from the mark of what Judgment Day means in the Scripture, still it is an important and impressive reference, to me at least. It says our lives have meaning, that it matters to eternity what you and I do this afternoon. And if Kubler-Ross doesn't say it strongly enough, the Bible does.

In the Parable, a certain man - it says - had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and near the end of the year, he came out one day to harvest his figs. "Came seeking food," the Bible says, and found none. And so he said to the vinedresser, the gardener: "Behold, for three years I have been trying to get fruit from this tree and have found none. So cut it down. Why should it use up my ground?" And the gardener answered, "Well, sir, let it alone this year also and I will dress it and dig it and dung it", it says in the Bible. "And if it bears fruit next year, well and good. If not, we will cut it down."

Apparently the owner of the vineyard agreed; he would wait another year.

That's tough, if you understand it, in its original setting; and it's tougher for us. What he was saying in effect is that the people of God were privileged like the fig tree to have space within His garden. And that privilege is not given for nothing. There is purpose to this life upon the earth and this movement; and every tree that takes up room in the garden, as it were, has to yield up fruit for the lord of the vineyard. The purpose of a fig tree, after all, is to bear figs. The purpose of the Christian faith is to live out the demands of the Gospel and to bring its important message to bear upon others and to be an effective instrument of change within the world, to grow its precious fruit upon the various vines and then to share it with the people of the earth. There is a decided emphasis to the message of evangelism, social involvement, and personal responsibility.

So let's pause a minute there: What have you done for the Lord this past year, by way of sharing His message and His love? This parable says that Christ has a claim upon your life, a claim which he can exercise at will, and will exercise again, and is exercising now. Your life is not your own. It's not ours to fritter away in whatever way we choose. Rather it is an insult to the Almighty to have us bandy around the faith and pretend to be His children and then go ahead and do what we want to do anyway; to pretend holiness on Sunday and then to do what we want to do throughout the week. It is a serious matter, for Christ's claim is unequivocal! You were bought with a price, purchased, the Bible says; your life is not your own. You belong to Him just as surely as a slave belonged to his master. He paid for you and me in the shedding of his blood and in his broken body.

The Parable says that we have to return our due, as it were, pay our rent for the space we occupy...That there are only so many places in the Kingdom, as there are only so many square feet on the earth. And the Lord takes notice of it all. Even the hairs on your head are numbered, the Bible says. It seems funny, but it's true. Not a sparrow falls to earth but that the Lord takes notice. Not one life is wasted; not one year or day or moment either. It all belongs to the promise and the purpose which God intended on the day He made it all.

So I am asking us, in the question of our sermon, as we come closer to Communion, "Can You Let It Wait Another Year?". The fig tree of the Parable had been a disappointment for a long time. Can you let it wait another year?, I ask you. That is, in the first instance, and in the first and final instance, the "it" means your commitment. You are for me or against me, says the Lord. There is no in-between. Are you prepared to surrender your life to Him, give Him everything? Some have, I know; others, just as surely, I know have not. And if the language bothers you, I am sorry. But I am sorry for you, and not the language, honestly, for I cannot temper it.

Like the old cartoon where a group of people at the foot of Mt. Sinai are saying to Moses, "Hey, Moses, can't you soften those commandments a little to make them more palatable to the younger generation?" - or the older, maybe, or the middle-aged? Mt. Sinai is a dangerous mountain, a fearful place. For it's there that God is so austere and far-removed and the Israelites dare not see his face. It is an imposing place. And so is Mt. Calvary. And we like to say that Sinai is the Old Testament: The austere and vengeful God is there. But then turn to Matthew also, and the Gospel

records, and read what Jesus says about those who deal trivially with the Gospel. Read it where he separates the sheeps and goats; read where he says, "Thou fool, this night your soul will be required of Thee." It is a serious matter, what we believe. And while I would not want to dangle your feet out over the edge of Hell, as Jonathan Edwards said he would like to do, you know not what a day may bring forth, let alone a year...I used to keep a cartoon in my study which said, "Beware of the fury of a patient man"...Can you let it wait another?

Can you let it wait another year? And there's one danger left, too, you know, which some of you have noticed. This is all quite general: O.K. sermon, but it doesn't bring it home, because it does not move it to specifics. And yet that's my purpose - how you apply the radical demands of the Gospel in your life is up to you, but you'd better be about it. If it's some compromise you have made within your family, or with the truth, or some dreadful habit which has consumed you, some alteration of the grand high road you set out to find in the beginning, some commitment to change your life for the better, some procrastination to seeking the proper help...If you're drifting and in need of anchor...If you have promised to be more kind and loving to those around you, to be more selfless, to reach out and touch the lives of others - and you can't manage it - that all follows, too...and you had better never let it wait another year. But before and ahead of all of that is a commitment which is called for in the Gospel, and this austere and final reminder to us all:

The fig tree had had a bad and non-productive season, three years in a row. The Master said to the vinedresser: "Okay, I'll let it go another year, since you asked me. And if it bears fruit,

well and good. But if not, then cut it down."

As they cut Him down...body and blood, broken for you.....Can you let it wait another year?..... I hope not...

Renew in us our commitment here, O Lord, to the Christ who gave himself for us. Amen.

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