

**THE DYNAMICS OF DISCIPLESHIP:
DISCERNING GOD'S WILL
Luke 13:1-9**

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A kind gentleman at a shopping mall struck up a conversation with a little girl who was standing beside a stroller with an infant aboard. "What's your brother's name?" inquired the man. The girl thought for a moment and then pointing to the infant said, "If he were my brother, his name would be Bobby. But he's not my brother--she's my sister and her name is Nancy."

When we ask the wrong questions, we are likely to get the wrong answers. Nowhere is that more prevalent than in the trouble spots of our lives. Discipleship has to do with decision and discipline. It is also a matter of discernment. Where is God when it hurts? What is the will of God for the circumstances of life? Inquiring minds want to know--it's no different today than it was the in the days of Jesus.

In troubled times, it's easy to ask the wrong questions. The wrong questions in the gospel story today are these: **Who sinned?** The Jerusalem News reported a construction accident down at the tower of Siloam, which took the lives of 18 people. "Were they more guilty than others living in Jerusalem?" asked the crowd. "How come they got it and others got away?"

Twenty-seven years ago this week, I stood in the debris of a tornado that wiped out a small Kentucky town, handing out sandwiches to those who were in shock. In the midst of conversations with people of that community, a pious lady approached me with an answer to the riddle of natural disasters. "At last," she said, "God has separated the real Christians from the hypocrites in this

town. Just look at whose houses are demolished and which ones are still standing. The righteous have been spared, the unrighteous destroyed.”

I don't know the criteria of judgment she was using but she had life figured out, at least from her perspective. There are, however, some serious questions about her conclusions. If suffering is just punishment for sin, why was I over there with the rescue team trying to dig people out of the debris? If suffering is a result of sin, why are so many of you engaged in health care professions trying to heal people? You see, if you ask the wrong questions, you get the wrong answers.

Why is God doing this to us? Have you ever heard that question asked? A second story in the Jerusalem newspaper that day reported Pilate carrying out a terrorist attack on a group of Galileans at worship in the temple. It was such a brutal affair that the blood of worshipers and the blood of their sacrifices flowed together in the streets of Jerusalem and people wanted to know, “What awful thing did these people do to be killed at worship?”

I watched a documentary on television this week about the life of Timothy McVeigh--maybe some of you saw it. McVeigh was asked if he knew that a day care center was housed at the Oklahoma City Federal Building before he bombed it. According to interviewers, McVeigh replied, “Innocent children were necessary collateral to get my cause across.” Through the years in attempts to comfort brokenhearted people, we've often said God's will is being done. As a result, God has been blamed for some rather outlandish things. Putting the will of God into the hands of serial bombers or kids with guns or drunken drivers is to make a leap of fatalism but not a leap of faith. If you ask the wrong questions, you get the wrong answers.

Why do bad things happen to good people? That seems to be the current question of our day. Harold

Kushner was not the first to pose that question. Job wanted to know. The Psalmists seemed to ask the question on a regular basis. Disciples asked it of Jesus. Jesus replied, "Who's good?" If life is a matter of who's good enough to escape then who can survive? No one is righteous – no, not one. A certain ruler came to Jesus and said, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Do you remember the response of Jesus? "Why do you call me good, there is only one good and that is God. Why do you put me in that category?" Instead of "Why me?," a better question might be, "Why not me?" What have I done to deserve even one of the blessings that I've known. If we get what we deserve, look out, we are all in trouble, starting with the pulpit and working its way out through the congregation today. If you ask the wrong questions, you get the wrong answers.

So, the right question for troubled times is not "Why?", but, "What now?" In the light of these circumstances, where can I find God's will? When by grace my life has been spared and I'm still alive, what now? Where is there meaning for my life now? Jesus answered that question with the parable of the fig tree. The answer is, "Bear fruit." How can we do that? Well, let me count some ways.

One way you do that is to **embrace your vulnerability**. In our home, when our boys got on the edge of questionable behavior there was a saying that I invoked. I would say, "You're living on dangerous ground!"

They understood that statement. But, aren't we all living on dangerous ground? If we live in fear, we will bear no fruit. It's only when we are able to take the protective shields down and trust the fact that life is "iffy" -- that it's written with an "if" right in the middle of it -- are we able then to embrace life in its fullest. Of course, we're here on dangerous ground. To live is to be on dangerous ground.

What are we going to do with that? It is in this extreme vulnerability that our salvation is won. Is that not

the example of Jesus? He was born a helpless baby in a Bethlehem manger. The omnipotent was absolutely dependent. He lived as an itinerant preacher without political or economic power. He died on a cross as a common criminal. "To the world," said Paul, "that's nonsense, that's foolishness, but for those of us who are being saved, it is the foundation of our faith."

He was seven years old when his family was forced to leave their Kentucky home because they couldn't pay their bills. At nine his mother died; at twenty-two, he lost his job as a store clerk. The woman he dated for four years refused to marry him. He lost more elections than he ever won. He had a nervous breakdown. His four-year-old son died. At 51, he was elected president. In his second term, he was assassinated. But Abraham Lincoln once said, "I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration if at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall have at least one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside of me."

The question is not, "Why me?" the question is, "What now?" And in the midst of a shaky world, a vulnerable world, a world where you take a chance to live, risk being vulnerable; it's worth the risk. Because vulnerable people bear fruit and I'm amazed at how much we can use our vulnerability, our woundedness, if you please, to help heal the hurts of the world. Jesus said, "Bear fruit". Embrace your vulnerability.

In the second place, you receive life as a precious gift. John Claypool, as well as Harold Kushner, lost a child. Laura was her name. She was ten years old when she died of leukemia. John Claypool at that time was pastor of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He wrote a little book entitled *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. I think it may be the best book on grief that I have ever read. In it he makes this statement, "Everywhere I turn I am surrounded by reminders of her."

Things we did together, things she said, things she loved. In the presence of those reminders I have two alternatives, I can dwell on the fact that she was taken away or focus on the wonder that she ever lived at all. And I have decided that the way of gratitude is the way for me.”

I will never forget talking to a dear friend of mine who was dying of cancer. He was fifty-eight years of age and had two sons at home. He had a wonderful and marvelous practice as a physician in that city. I was close enough to him to ask, “Lyman, what are your feelings at these forks of the road?” I will never forget his response. He said, “I’m grateful, Howard, I’m really grateful. I’ve had a much better life than I deserve. I want to live but I’m ready to die.” To live each moment, to love each moment, to face each challenge with gratitude, well, that is fruitful living.

The question is not, “Why?” the question is, “What now?” And the answer to the “What now?” question is to live a fruitful life, embrace your vulnerability, and receive life as a gift.

And one more thing, **take good care of yourself.**

Did you catch this in the story? I’ve never caught it before until I wrote this particular sermon. The gardener pled for this barren fig tree. He said, “Leave it alone for another year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it and, maybe then, it will bear fruit.” If you can’t have a garden without tender loving care, you can’t have a life without receiving the help that you need. Be willing to lean when it is appropriate to lean. Fruitfulness comes out of somebody else taking care of the fig tree in such a way that it reconnects its root system.

It was a large impressive waiting room filled with the finest of furniture and all kinds of people who were waiting to see one of three physicians. Over in the corner there was an elderly lady who began to cry. At first she wept softly and silently but as the hurt and pain of all the years began to flood her heart and mind, she began to cry

openly. People pretended not to notice. They hid their faces behind books or magazines picked up from the table. A little kid was sitting across the room playing with toys beside his mother. Nobody taught him to be polite, so he toddled down out of his chair and made his way across the waiting room until he got to the feet of the crying lady and reaching up to her, he touched her on the cheek he said, "It's all right, it's all right, everything is going to be all right." The lady smiled.

I keep a little plaque my mother gave me in a prominent place where I go to pray and play. This is what it says: "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God will not keep you." May I say that again? "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you." So I say, my dear friends today, take good care of yourself, including your soul because God is counting on you to bear fruit. The fruits of the spirit are these: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is God's will for you.

So we do not presume to come to this table of Holy Communion trusting in our own goodness but in God's great mercy. We may not be good enough to gather up the crumbs under God's table but the Lord in His tender mercy invites us to come as His honored guests. We will find strength from this meal to bear much fruit that God's will may come on earth as it is in heaven.

Welcome to the table. Amen.