

The Time Is Now

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Luke 13:1-9

The time has come. The time is now. Just go. Go! Go!! I don't care how. You can go by foot. You can go by cow. Marvin K. Mooney, will you please go now!

Are you familiar with the Dr. Seuss book called Marvin K. Mooney? I read it to my kids when they were small and I look forward to the time when I can read it to my grandkids...although I can't be in too big of a hurry for that since none of our five daughters are married yet and they are all still in high school, college and graduate school. The protagonist of the book is an unassuming, furry little fellow who seems to be nonchalantly walking through life. When all of a sudden a larger than life hand booms into his little world and says with a certain amount of urgency: THE TIME HAS COME! THE TIME IS NOW!

We aren't really sure what is so pressing for Marvin K. Mooney, where he just has to go. But we sense the pressure of getting it done. In our Scripture passage for today, we find Jesus to be a bit more direct don't we? There is no question what Jesus is telling his disciples to do...NOW. It sounds like: "turn or burn." I am hopeful that we can coax a good word out of this passage this morning for us gentle Presbyterians.

Jesus had just finished a little teaching on judgment when some people came up to him to tell him about some horrible things that have happened to some people from Galilee. That blood-thirsty Pontius Pilate had slaughtered a group of Galileans who were on their way to worship. It's hard to imagine the horror, isn't it? A family on the way to church is murdered.

In ancient Israel, culture and tradition would have hinted that those people must have really done some bad sinning to be struck down in this way. This may have been amped up a bit more because the citizens were living in fear of this unpredictable tyrant named Pilate. Perhaps if some explanation for the massacre is provided, then they can avoid that behavior and keep themselves and their families safe and alive. As if reading their minds, Jesus says, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were

worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Inside, everyone is whispering, "Yeah." And I'm glad I'm not a sinner like them.

Jesus clears this up with one breath and says, "NO, they are no worse than you, but I tell you, unless you repent, you will perish just like they did." And then Jesus gives his own example of When Bad Things Happen to Good People. A tower in Siloam fell and accidentally killed 18 innocent people. Did they do anything to deserve this? Jesus says, "Nope." No more than the Haitians deserved the hurricane or the Italians deserved the earthquake or the Chinese deserved the flooding. Bad things can and will happen to good people without a moment's notice.

And what are we supposed to do with this uncertainty? With this randomness?

Jesus says twice, "The time is now." Repent or you will perish just like they did.

But then Jesus gives us a little hope in the form of a fig tree. A man is walking through his vineyard and sees a lovely fig tree with deep, green leaves. There's one tiny problem. This tree has not been planted as a decoration or as something just to look at. It was planted to bear fruit. This is now the third year in a row that this tree which is taking up valuable resources, like ground and water, and it still hasn't produced any fruit! So the landowner tells the gardener to get the axe.

Not unlike Abraham pleading for the people in Sodom, or Moses begging for the lives of the Israelites, this gardener asks for a little more time to help coax out some beautiful fruit. Sir, please, let me work the soil around it a bit more. Let me put together a nutrient-rich mixture of fertilizer. Just give me a year, to pour into this little guy and who knows, maybe we can still get some fruit.

The command to repent or perish is softened with a little bit of manure, a little bit of help from the gardeners in our lives.

I read that the Greek word for **perish** in this example is referring to eternity, not just mortality. Of course, we are all going to die; we are all human. We usually don't know when or where. But to perish is something lifted up as having "eternal consequences." Jesus is saying, "Repent now, so we can be together forever." But I wonder if Jesus is also saying, "Repent now, so you don't miss the joy of living!"

To repent is one of Luke's favorite verbs! The Greek verb to repent means to change one's mind. It refers to a 180-degree change of mind and heart. Versions of the

“ [Jesus] connected with people and he wasn't afraid to connect with people whose lives were not producing any fruit.”

verb "to repent" show up about fifty times in the New Testament. Half of those are recorded by Luke. Luke names lots of repenters: like the woman who anointed Jesus' feet or the prodigal son or Zacchaeus. Their lives were filled with conflict, often shameful behavior and misery. But they are the lucky ones I think, because they hit some sort of bottom that didn't kill them and they had a chance to repent. Or they had some sort of encounter with Christ or with a gardener of God's and then they repented. They turned towards God and then they got to experience the joy in life that comes from love and mercy and unexpected grace. And then their lives begin producing fruit.

This fig tree was deemed "worthless" by fruit-producing fig tree standards. Yet the gardener is saying, let me spend some time with this one.

By all rules, Skinner, was a dead man. With these words Arthur Bressi begins his retelling of the day he found his best friend in a World War II Japanese concentration camp. The two were high school buddies. They grew up together in Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania-playing ball, skipping school, double-dating. Arthur and Skinner were inseparable. It made sense, then that when one joined the army, the other would as well. They rode the same troopship to the Philippines. That's where they were separated. Skinner was on a Bataan when it fell to the Japanese in 1942. Arthur Bressi was captured a month later.

Through the prison grapevine, Arthur learned the whereabouts of his friend. Skinner was close to death in a nearby camp. Arthur volunteered for work detail in the hope that his company might pass through the other camp. One day they did.

Arthur requested and was given five minutes to find and speak to his friend. He knew to go to the sick side of the camp. It was divided into two sections-one for those expected to recover, the other for those given no hope. Those expected to die lived in a barracks called "zero ward." That's where Arthur found Skinner. He called his name, and out of the barracks walked the seventy-nine

pound shadow of the friend he had once known. Arthur wrote:

"I stood at the wire fence of the Japanese prisoner-or-war camp on Luzon and watched my childhood buddy, caked in filth and racked with the pain of multiple diseases, totter toward me. He was dead; only his boisterous spirit hadn't left his body. I wanted to look away, but couldn't. His blue eyes, watery and dulled, locked on me and wouldn't let go."

Malaria. Amebic dysentery. Pellagra. Scurvy. Beriberi. Skinner's body was a dormitory for tropical diseases. He couldn't eat. He couldn't drink. He was nearly gone.

Arthur didn't know what to do or say. His five minutes were nearly up. He began to finger the heavy knot of the handkerchief tied around his neck. In it was his high-school class ring. At the risk of punishment, he'd smuggled the ring into camp. Knowing the imminence of disease and the scarcity of treatment, he had been saving it to barter for medicine or food for himself. But one look at Skinner, and he knew he couldn't save it any longer.

As he told his friend good-bye, he slipped the ring through the fence into Skinner's frail hand and told him to "wheel and deal" with it. Skinner objected, but Arthur insisted. He turned and left, pretty sure he would never see his friend alive again.

What kind of mercy and love is this? It's one thing to give a gift to the healthy. It's one thing to share a treasure with the strong—who can benefit from the gift and maybe even pay it forward. But to give your best to the weak, to entrust your treasure to the dying—now that's saying something. That's saying, "Don't give up hope. You have value. Here, let me work the soil around your roots and add some nutrients to help you produce fruit and live...even if only for a short time."

Do you know anyone who is standing on Skinner's side of the fence? A kid in class who is being teased? A friend with cancer? A spouse with depression? If you know anyone who is afraid or has failed or is frail, then

we know someone who needs the special care and nutrients—of grace and love to help coax out the fruit of life.

After Albert Einstein's wife died, his sister, Maja, moved in to assist with the household affairs. For fourteen years she cared for him, allowing his valuable research to continue. In 1950, she suffered a stroke and lapsed into a coma. Thereafter, Einstein spent two hours every afternoon reading aloud to her from Plato. She gave no sign of understanding his words, but he read anyway. If she understood anything by his gesture, she understood this—he believed that she was worth his time, that she was valuable and worthy of love.

I think Jesus calls us into this dance of grace. The fruitless fig tree doesn't deserve it, the dying man doesn't deserve it, and we certainly don't deserve it, yet God pours out his love onto us. Then God uses us and joins us in the encounter with each other. All of a sudden, we are producing fruit and also coaxing fruit out of others. And I think that that's the kind of joy Jesus doesn't want us to miss—whether we are giving or receiving. And that's why the time is now.

Randy Pausch was a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon, who became acutely aware of how precious time is when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In an effort to leave some wisdom and stories of his life for his three young children, Randy wrote the book *The Last Lecture* before he died at the age of 47.

In this book he tells the story of when he and his sister were at Disney World with their parents. He was 12 and his sister was 14 and their parents figured they were now old enough to roam around the park just a bit without being monitored; this was 1972. In those days before cell phones, their parents told them to be careful and they named a spot where they would meet in 90 minutes.

The kids were thrilled beyond belief. They were at the coolest place on earth and they had the freedom to explore it on their own. They were so grateful to their parents for taking them there and for recognizing they were mature enough to be on their own that they decided to pool their allowances and buy their parents a present.

They went into a store and found what they considered to be a perfect gift: a ceramic salt and pepper shaker featuring two bears hanging off of a tree. They paid the \$10 and skipped down Main Street in search of their next attraction.

Randy was holding the bag and in horrible instant, it slipped out of his hands, crashing on the pavement. The

thing broke on impact and both he and his sister were in tears. An adult guest in the park saw what had happened and she came over to the kids and told them to take it back to the store. "I'm sure they will give you a new one."

Randy objected, "I can't do that. It was my fault. I dropped it. Why would the store give us another one?" She encouraged them to just try.

So they went back to the store...and they didn't lie. They explained what happened. The employees in the store listened to their sad story, smiled at them...and told them they could have a new salt and pepper shaker. The Disney employees even said it was their fault because they hadn't wrapped the original salt and pepper shaker well enough! Their message was, "Our packaging should have been able to withstand a fall due to a twelve-year-old's overexcitement."

The kids were in shock...filled with gratitude and giddy with joy. Unexpected, undeserved grace does that. And one of the best things I've discovered about God's economy, is that it doesn't matter if you are on the giving end or the receiving end of the love and mercy...the reverberations of joy are felt by everyone involved. We don't want to miss that.

Fruitless fig trees are all around us...and I'm pretty sure I have had my fair share of seasons without producing much fruit. But the owner is looking for fruit. God created this world with beautiful people who need each other to bear fruit. Please do not assume that those of us sitting in church today—whether on this side of the pulpit or that side of the pulpit are automatically the gardeners. We are in this together and we are not going to get it right every time. But if we stay connected to the owner of the vineyard and we respond to each other with the love, mercy and grace we have received, then maybe we can coax out some good fruit in each other.

Think about where you normally spend your time and money: where you get your haircut, where you shop for groceries or play golf or cards or get your morning coffee or who you sit by in the bleachers watching lacrosse or soccer or baseball. Do you know their names? Do you know their stories? Can you tell when your barista need a little encouraging?

You know that's what Jesus did. He connected with people and he wasn't afraid to connect with people whose lives were not producing any fruit. Actually, he seemed to dwell among those who often were getting it wrong. But he didn't do it from a place of judgment or superiority, he did it from a place of unconditional love. He went into the home of the crooked tax collector; he

spoke with the adulterous woman in a public place. He touched the terminally ill, the forgotten, the outcast, the children. Jesus didn't care what kind of lifestyle they were living and He never asked people to "join me at the temple." He went to them and spent time with them... building relationships, coaxing fruit.

That's why Jesus was so intoxicating to be with. He was authentic and genuine. He looked people in the eyes; He used their name and knew their story. He met their needs and stood next to them when they were judged and ridiculed and left for dead.

Want to know what happened to Skinner? He took the ring from his high school friend Arthur and buried it in the barracks floor. The next day he took the biggest risk of his life. He approached the "kindest" of the guards and passed him the ring through the fence. The guard asked Skinner if it was valuable? Skinner assured him that it was. The guard smiled and slipped the ring into his pocket and left. A couple of days later, the guard walked by Skinner and dropped a package at his feet: sulfanilamide tablets. A day later he returned with limes to combat the scurvy. Then came a new pair of pants and some canned beef. Within three weeks Skinner was on his feet. Within three months he was taken to the healthy side of the sick camp. In time he was able to work. As far as Skinner knew, he was the only American ever to leave the "Zero Ward" alive.

Both Skinner and Arthur somehow survived their ordeal. And when they met up at home in Mount Carmel, Skinner brought with him a small box for Arthur...an exact copy of the high-school ring that saved his life.

Friends we can't underestimate the power of love—to add the nutrients and the care around the trees that seem barren. Nor can we overestimate the amount of time we have.

The time has come. The time is now. Just go. Go! Go!! I don't care how. You can go by foot. You can go by cow. Marvin K. Mooney, will you please go now!

I said Go! And go I meant! The time had come. So...Marvin went.



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Church of the Palms

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