

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 13:1-9, “You Are Worthy (and So Are They)”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/20/2022

While thinking this week about who is worthy and who is not worthy,
I was led deep in our society’s cultural archives, to Wayne’s World.
“Hey Wayne, is Wayne’s World going to be remembered as one of the
great comedies in film history?”
“Oh, yeah, Garth, I’m sure it will ... *Not!*”

Does anyone remember what basement band headbangers Wayne and Garth say
when they meet rock and roll legend Alice Cooper?
“We’re not worthy! We’re not worthy!”

They were really ahead of their time.
In our world of hot takes and instant reactions,
it’s more important than ever to understand exactly
who is worthy of praise, and who is NOT worthy.

There’s a truck in town with a sign that says,
“Socialism works for those who don’t.”
By this we learn that socialists and non-workers are not worthy,
but capitalists and workers *are* worthy.
The collectively paid for roadways driven on by the truck
are still being assessed for worthiness.

We can do the same thing with bumper stickers regarding

- Honor students
- Calvin peeing on things
- The environment
- Critical race theory
- Vaccinations
- Political candidates
- Guns
- Immigration
- Nationalism
- Taxes
- Something about Brandon
- Puppies vs kittens
- Starts vs. seeds

Did I miss any?

Once you have your position staked out
with no possibility for changing your mind on any of these things,
you can then find out who is right (that is, agrees with you)
and who is wrong (happens to disagree with you) on each issue.

The people who disagree with you, are NOT WORTHY.

Those who agree with you are eminently WORTHY.

If you find out that someone agrees with you on one thing,
and disagrees with you on another thing,
then there must be some reason that they just DON'T GET IT.

You spend hours researching on the internet to discern this fatal flaw,
and what you find out will determine if this person is or isn't worthy.

Finally, identify media personalities who substantiate your list,
and don't read or listen to anybody else.

Rinse and repeat, and before long you will be a full fledged
bitter, angry, hate-filled ogre who looks down your nose at everybody else
for no good reason while feeling extremely good about yourself.
And when something bad happens to those who aren't worthy you can say,
"Thanks be to God that I'm not a sinner like them."
Then you look out the window wistfully,
wondering why there's so much division in the world.

Or, you can be a Christian.
In our passage this week, Jesus has another idea.

Cultivate humility, let go of self-flattering comparisons.

The reason? Judgment comes for everyone, and even those who aren't bearing fruit
right now are given grace and space to join what God is doing.

So you see, Jesus teaching his disciples in Luke 12,
but while he does so, some other people are listening in.

He talks about considering where your treasure is – in heaven or on earth?

He talks about being watchful for the day that the Son of Man
will come to bring everyone to account.

Strangely, he talks about ... bringing division, rather than peace.

In all these ways, Jesus has been talking about how things
will fall out at the end of time.

And so while he's saying all this, some people on the fringes jump in and say,

“Hey, Jesus, talk about final judgment, you know who really got judged?
Those dirty Galileans killed by Pilate while they sacrificed on the Passover!
Good thing we're not like them, right Jesus?”

And Jesus ... well, doesn't quite go along with that interpretation of things.

He responds to their statement, as he so often does, with a question,
“Do you think they were worse sinners because of how they suffered?”
The question is a critique of their logic.

If something bad has happened,
does that reveal to you that the people it happened to were “unworthy”?

Sometimes we get that impression.
Do good – good things happen to you, do bad – bad things happen to you.

And in general, when we're dealing with the wisdom literature of the Bible,
you might be able to say that has *some element of truth* to it.
When we live well, our life will tend to go well,
because living well tends to bring about good outcomes
for the whole community.

But Jesus is saying we can't judge the tragedy in our neighbor's particular situation
based on proverbial generalities.

He goes further than that – in response to their question, he says,
“I tell you no! (They aren't worse because of what happened to them.)
But! ... unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Which is not to say Jesus is trying to scare them straight,
or threaten them with eternal damnation, or anything like that.

He's making a simple point: Judgment comes for all of us,
so don't spend your time prior to your own time of judgment
looking down your nose at people less fortunate than you.

He repeats this observation with another tragedy –
the 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them.

Now, we don't know about this other than this reference from Jesus,
but it was headline news in Jesus' day.

Jesus says, "Do you think they were more guilty
than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!"

In our own day, Jesus would be rejecting what is often called,
"blaming the victim."

Blaming the victim goes like this:

- Oh, do people who have your skin color get arrested more than people with lighter skin color? Do they also get heavier sentences for committing the same crimes? Well, if you just follow the laws, you won't have that problem.
- Oh, were you harassed by men at your workplace or on the street? You must have been sending signals that invited it.
- Oh, did you lose your job when the Big Box Stores moved into town, or moved out of town? That's what you get for not working harder in school.

We hear this *even today* when natural disasters happen.

When the Indonesian islands were hit by a Tsunami,
there were some who said, "Well, it's because they're Muslim."

When people get cancer,
there are some who say, "Well, they didn't have the best lifestyle."

When Russia invaded Ukraine, they said,
"Well, it's because they let Nazi gangs run the country."

Jesus says, “No. These people weren’t worse than anyone else.
But if you’re so interested in blaming people for tragedies,
then you should really be concerned about yourself.”

Always one for a good story, Jesus closes with a parable.

In the parable, a man goes looking for figs, and grows frustrated with his fig tree.
Three years, and no figs!

So he tells his gardener to chop it down.

But the gardener says, “Hey, boss. Take it easy. Let’s give the tree one more year.
Let’s give it what is needed to flourish and grow.
Then if after another year there’s no fruit, we’ll cut it down.”

In our rush to point out who is or isn’t worthy of belonging,
we forget that the tables can be easily turned on us.
Those who judge should be careful, lest they be judged.

I have found that my judgment of others
gets turned back on me most often ... by me!
When I spend time evaluating whether others are or are not worthy
it only amplifies my own fear that I am not worthy.

Guess what? You are worthy. And so are they. And so am I.
You are worthy because of the fruit of Spirit that comes by grace.

With this story of the fig tree, Jesus turns the emphasis
from those who have suffered
(whether the Galileans or the people under the fallen tower),
and onto those who are pointing their fingers.

The reality is that their self-righteous view of others isn’t producing any good fruit
because it is so lacking in grace, compassion and love.

Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazzia writes, “The story of the fig tree reminds us that the world’s expectations do not need to be ours.

The gardener puts their faith in that which they have no control. Digging a bigger hole and filling it with fertilizer,

they tend to the tree with everything it needs to grow into its purpose.

Perhaps this means bearing figs.

Or maybe it provides shade for the laborers during the harvest,

an opportunity for the gardener to tend to the fields in a new way,

or transformation of the owner’s ability to see beyond the commodification of the land.”

Living by comparing ourselves to others –

whether we think we’re much better *or* much worse than others –

creates a toxic environment for spiritual growth.

In this way we see that comparison is the thief of joy.

God wants good fruit to come from our lives, but God is also patient and fair.

Time will be granted for us to learn to attend to our own being,

and stop getting so worked up about the business of others.

And as the Spirit aerates our soil, as humility fertilizes and adds nutrients, we will,

no doubt, produce one or two figs that weren’t showing up

in prior years.

So know that you belong. Know that you are worthy.

Ignore the haters and don’t waste energy being one.

When we accept our own acceptability before God,

we step into the river of God’s love that

enables us to live life full to the brim.