

**God's Political Priorities**  
**Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9**  
**Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**March 20, 2022**

I wasn't here last week. Shannon and I took a couple of days to visit a friend in South Carolina, and during that time I asked Garrett Walkup to offer the sermon. I got a chance to take a look at the things that he had to say and was fascinated that one of his big points came from a book by a man named Bill Hybels, founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church. Bill Hybels's book *Holy Discontent* has meant a lot to me because one of the parts of that book was a big "Aha!" moment in my life's faith journey, and I found it interesting that Garrett came right up to that part of the book and then stopped. I wouldn't be able to really focus today if I didn't mention that, so I want to do that.

Pastor Hybels talks about having a Popeye moment, which I thought was funny since Garrett brought up superheroes. Popeye is a kind of a superhero, and if you've seen the old Popeye cartoons, even more than the comics, they always have a rhythm to them. Things are fine, and then they get less fine, and then they get chaotic, and then they get crazy, and then about two-thirds of the way through every single one of these, Popeye says "That's all I can stand, I can't stand no more!" and then you know it's about to get good, because that's when the spinach comes out. Pastor Hybels called it his Popeye moment when

God used the frustrations to stir up discontent in him that led to starting Willow Creek Church.

It's not just a question of wanting things done your way, or a question of being uncomfortable. It's a question of realizing that the stakes are so high that you have to take the risk of doing something, because the risk that you take in doing something is greater than what you risk or experience in just standing by and doing nothing. I pray that God will let you experience your own Popeye moments. They are powerful, and I pray that—I won't say if they happen, I'll say when they happen—I'll pray that when they happen you won't look for an easier assignment. You'll open up the spinach and you'll dig in.

Garrett also spoke about covenant, and how entering into covenantal relationship affects everybody involved, going beyond just a transaction. And of course, he spoke about being spurred into action by witnessing injustice, and if that seems like too much to handle or even too much to process when you consider what you've seen in the world, I want you to remember: you are part of a church, and part of the point of belonging to a church is that we are not meant to go through this life alone. That when we come together in the name of Jesus, scripture promises He is in our midst—and if you believe that Jesus is in your midst when you gather in his name, then there is NO work of justice that is more than we can handle.

I focused on two scriptures today because they are both so wonderful and they seemed to speak so loudly to our present moment,

here in March of 2022, and they both seem to speak to the question of God's calling, even on the Woodbury United Methodist Church. In the gospel, we have some preaching from Jesus followed by a strange parable. Jesus is asked about the latest atrocity committed by Pilate, but he doesn't take that opportunity to say anything critical of Pilate. Instead, he calls people to repent. Then he brings up the recent collapse of a tower that killed people, again using that as a call to repent.

I looked at this and thought “Wow! Jesus is engaging his preaching with current events, and what's happening with political leaders!” There are few things more dangerous for preachers to talk about. In the time I've been preaching, actually in all the time I've gone to church, I have never heard someone say that their pastor is political in their preaching and meant it as a compliment.

So, let's jump in! How does Jesus do it? Great injustice and great tragedy are addressed by Jesus with a single response. Pilate's bloodletting is a shocking injustice, while the collapse of the wall on the innocent feels tragic. Whatever the cause, innocents have died.

I picture this and I think I know why the disciples asked him about this we've all had people in our lives who egg us on. Everyone hates the Romans, something indefensible has been done to people worshipping, so you ask “Rabbi, what do you think about this?” I mean, you just know they wanted him to say something biting, and to denounce this heinous act. Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead, he invites the disciples to repent. The fact that someone has done wrong and someone ought to do

something about it, plus a person's own sense of self-righteousness in observing such things, might make you neglect the ongoing call to repent. So, Jesus orients them back. Those who suffer injustice themselves need to repent. Those who've endured tragedy need to repent. Everybody needs to turn to God **now**.

It's scripture, so there are a lot of ways you can read this. Some have read this as an urgent call to repentance right now, because none of us knows when the day may come when **we** are the ones under that collapsed tower. That's not a bad message, but today I'm feeling that this is only one part of the message, particularly because the scripture goes on from there. Dietrich Bonhoeffer—more than ever seeming to be a theologian speaking directly to our present day—suggests the idea that repentance is not thinking first about your own needs, your own problems, even your own sins; but it's about allowing oneself to be caught up in the way of Jesus. I think that's vital. Another way of looking at this was put forth by pastor and theologian James Howell, who says that to repent is to encounter “life, real life, to encounter God, and to encounter your purpose in a new way.” So: you look around, you see evil and injustice, you see tragedies happening in the world? Repent. But then there's more after that—to repent is to discover a different reality.

Next, Jesus pivots into this odd story about a tree that hasn't borne fruit for years and the gardener who pleads for it to be allowed just one more growing season. What's that all about? Well, this gets preached a lot as saying you had better prove yourself worthy or God will have you

destroyed. Could be, but I think there's another way to read this. I discovered these words from theologian Wendy Farley, suggesting:

*One of the most terrible beliefs of Christianity is that God punishes us with suffering. This belief, inflicted on grief-stricken or pain-ridden individuals to justify their suffering, and on groups to justify their continued oppression—the association of suffering with punishment denies the right to resist suffering. This theology conspires with the pain to lock God away from the sufferer. Jesus's parable of the fig tree turns tragic news into hope. It's time to chop it down, yet Jesus says “Wait!”*

If that had been a way that you had understood this scripture, I invite you to conceptualize fruit-bearing-less (there's got to be a better word for that) not necessarily as personal virtue, but more about providing sustenance and vitality to God's people.

That's the purpose of planting a fig tree, right? To get the fruit. Just a month or so ago as we engaged in a long, protracted discussion of spiritual gifts, we noted that spiritual gifts aren't intended to benefit ourselves, but rather to benefit others. Take that a step further and it seems evident that the purpose of the church is not a self-serving purpose, but that the purpose of the church is to serve others in the name of Jesus the Christ. If that's the mission, how do we measure up?

I was stunned by these words by Lutheran theologian Matt Skinner so I'm going to share them with you:

*Imagine when religion stops bearing fruit. Imagine a faith tradition that cannot or will not do anything to contribute mercy and beauty to the world. Imagine a congregation so out of touch with the needs and shifting demographics of its community that its worship functions as isolationist cultural self-adoration. Imagine ecclesial hierarchs who endorse a despot's unprovoked war. Imagine church leaders who refuse to take serious action to remedy entrenched misogyny and homophobia in their organizational structures. Imagine churches that stay silent when school boards censure books, or politicians pass laws that endanger the lives and well-being of trans youth. Imagine a theological system that exists mostly to perpetuate itself, and the privileges of its adherence just sucking nutrients from the soil without doing anything to curb people's hungers.*

He concludes “Count me among those eager to see God cut all those things down so something else can grow in their place. I'll help sharpen the axe.” He packs a lot in there, but I agree that it's reasonable to understand this parable of a fig tree on a prolonged fruitless streak as indicative of God's priorities for the world, again coming on the heels of that conversation about things happening currently in the world. Church, I don't believe that this is a passage about people needing to prove themselves worthy to a God who threatens us with violence. I don't see it within the context of Jesus talking about tragedies in the world that have

befallen the innocent and then reiterating his call for repentance, again and again. It seems this passage speaks to us about a God who aches when the things provided, whether people or groups or whatever, that those things that are provided to supply the fruits that bring healing to a world that so desperately needs healing—fail to do so.

Remember, that was just one of our scriptures. We also had verses from the prophet Isaiah. So much to say about Isaiah! but today I'll point out that Isaiah also calls us to repent, very clearly, but also in contrast to what some see as implied violence in the gospel. Isaiah makes it very clear that this repentance is something to bring us great joy, by further aligning ourselves to God, a joy even as one might have at a great feast which satisfies one totally. Isaiah reminds us that God's ways are higher. That there is a greater story, there's something bigger going on that is different from the obvious story of the meandering world as we experience it. Which kind of hit home, because I spend much of my time in that meandering world. I've got responsibilities, things I'm supposed to be doing, and that can distract you from the greater picture.

We who live in Christ were meant to observe things from on high, as if on a high mountain. You see the bigger picture that way, and sometimes things you see from the bigger picture that you can't see from that up close, everyday vantage point. So, you spend your time and your days doing what you must, expending time, expending money. If you are able to pull back and see God's priorities for the world, would we spend our resources any differently? (That can mean whatever resource you care to consider. Time and money are mentioned in the Isaiah, but I

think that's meant to spark your imagination.) The prophet says “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and you labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good.”

We have been planted here at this time and in this place, and the needs of the world are obvious. They are many. The needs of the world threaten to overwhelm us, and we gathered as the church are called to bring good news to the world. We are called to do our part in healing a hurting world, and in all of it we are called to a repentance that I believe is about reorienting our lives to see the greater need.

We are approaching a time of sharing in Holy Communion. We do this because we recognize that it can help orient your life in a more Christ-focused direction. That's why I feel this is appropriate each Sunday during Lent, because it has power to help orient your life your life in a more Christ-focused direction. In writing down those words, it occurred to me that this is a message even more dangerous than talking about politics in church. And yet here we are.

Lord, your will be done. Lord, your people are here. Amen.