

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**  
**Third Sunday in Lent - March 14, 2004**  
**Anne G. Cohen**

**Luke 13:1-9**

In ancient times, physical suffering was viewed as a consequence, a divine punishment for wrongdoing. In this passage, Jesus talks about two recent instances of death and suffering - and states that those punished were no more sinful than anyone else. To avoid similar outcomes, we ALL need to REPENT - a repeat of John the Baptist's message.

Luke's Jesus then follows this message with a story - about a fruitless fig tree - a common metaphor for Israel and her faithlessness. The tree, about to be destroyed, is given a year's grace period - during which it can be fertilized, nurtured and given every opportunity to bear fruit. The tree may still fail, but there is a Second Chance offered - along with some help.

JUSTICE AND MERCY are presented side by side. In the face of Justice, we are called to repent of our less than ethical impulses. In the arms of Mercy, we are called to surrender and flourish. Either way - we stand a chance of being redeemed.

**For Our Reflection**

So long as men and women believed themselves to be responsible beings, called to choose, and accountable to God for their choices, life might be tragic, but it was not trivial.

- Sydney Cave, The Christian Way (1949)

Does any one really believe one can escape from the responsibility for what one has done and thought in secret?...The center of our whole being is involved in the center of all being; and the center of all being rests in the center of our being.

- Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations (1949)

I've learned that if I'm in trouble at school, I'm in more trouble at home. (Age 11)

- Live and Learn and Pass It On

compiled by H. Jackson Brown, Jr. (pp.90 & 15)

**A Year of Living Dangerously**

A friend of mine died on Thursday. He was in perfect health.  
Last Saturday Tom was turning compost into the soil to create a garden

plot in their backyard. He'd had polio as a child - so, to do the work, he had to unlatch his leg braces and sit or lie down in the dirt. He spent five hours doing something he loved and planning for the future.

A toxin in the soil or compost infected his glands. He went into septic shock and never came out. Until the autopsy and soil samples are done, we won't know what killed him. But for the time being, his wife Eileen and 8 year old daughter, Arianne, might find a small comfort in the thought that Tom gave his life for the garden - however unintentional or unnecessary that might seem.

Tom had survived polio and childhood, law school and the poverty of disability pay. He had stopped a neighbor from abusing children in her home daycare and avoided being killed when she poured poison over the fence into their vegetable garden in revenge. Tom was repairing the family car one morning - and the radiator was still too hot when he took the cap off. To make sure that his toddler playing nearby wouldn't get burned - Tom threw himself over the geyser, burning his chest. In my eyes, he was a hero. In his eyes, he did what he had to.

They moved to Tehachapi just before Christmas - because it was a safer, cleaner environment for all of them - especially Arianne. They could not have imagined that this was ahead of them - that Tom's second and third chances had been used up.

If Tom were to look at this story in Luke, my guess is that he would have identified more with the gardener than the tree. It was his habit to intercede on behalf of those who were voiceless, to lobby for second chances, to take the manure into his own hands and salvage the soil, the garden, the tree, the planet - if he possibly could.

Eileen and Arianne relied on Tom for their livelihood, for partnership and parenting, for conversations into the night, for hope, for deep and abiding and redeeming love. They gave one another a thousand second chances to become new people, to forgive, to flourish.

And now all of us who knew and loved Tom - especially his family - have to figure out how to live in a world without him. We have to learn how to fertilize and water each other so that we will survive this and get another chance at life. Because, as far as I know, we don't redeem ourselves. We are dependent on the tangible support and kindness of others - to nurture us, to challenge us to be better people, to give us second and third chances, to offer the wisdom of experience, to acknowledge our progress and hold up a mirror to our blind spots, to love us out of death into flourishing.

We can confess our shortcomings, repent of our wrongdoings, admit to our brokenness and avoid retribution. But without another person - to hear our confession, receive restitution, offer us forgiveness, intercede on our behalf and embody the mercy we seek - redemption is only an idea and reality is isolated misery.

We need each other. We redeem each other. We flourish only in community. And the larger the community, the more manure and compost and fertilizer is needed.

Jesus' fig tree had a dangerous year ahead of it. It was completely dependent on the gardener for its very life. In truth, every year for us is a year of living dangerously - dependent on others for "redemption" after "redemption." - dependent on God for every breath and every second and third and fiftieth chance at life.

This church has been through several resurrections and redemptions - and is living proof that we are dependent on one another for the flourishing of many. People we've never met depend on this church for fertilizer and challenge, for the example it sets and the influence it has on social structures. There are multiple congregations who have yet to get here - future members who will join you and worship and grow here. Everything we do today will have an impact on their lives.

These are dangerous times. That's a lot of responsibility. But, like Tom, we do what we can with manure and compost - we make the most of our second and third chances - we allow those who care about us to redeem us - and we give our lives for the sake of the garden and its future flourishing.

It doesn't really matter what kills us - as long as we have LIVED - and offered hope in times of darkness and danger.

### **WHAT TO DO IN THE DARKNESS**

by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre  
(p.27 Weavings, March/April 2004)

Go slowly

Consent to it

But don't wallow in it

Know it as a place of germination

And growth

Remember the light

Take an outstretched hand if you find one

Exercise unused senses

Find the path by walking it

Practice trust

Watch for dawn

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### **Sunday Bulletin**

#### **WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship (unison)

Now, O God, calm me into a quietness that heals and listens,  
and molds my longings and passions, my wounds and wonderings  
into a more holy and human shape.

+ Opening Hymn    Come to Tend God's Garden    Hymnal # 586

+ Opening Prayer (unison)

Thank you for all that I forget are gifts, not rights

Forgive me for all the grievances I remember too well.

Save me from the self-pity, the self-seeking,

the fat-heartedness which is true poverty.

Guide me, if I'm willing, (drive me if I'm not),

into the hard ways of sacrifice which are just and loving.

Make me wide-eyed for beauty, and for my neighbor's need and goodness;

wide-willed for peace-making, and for the confronting of power

with the call to compassion;

wide-hearted for love and for the unloved,

who are the hardest to touch and need it the most.

Dull the envy in me which criticizes and complains life

into a thousand ugly bits.

Keep me honest and tender enough to heal,

tough enough to be healed of my hypocrisies.  
Match my appetite for privilege with the stomach for commitment.  
Teach me the great cost of paying attention that,  
    naked to the dazzle of your back as you pass,  
        I may know I am always on holy ground.  
Breathe into me the restlessness and courage to make something new,  
    something saving, and something true  
        that I may understand what it is to rejoice.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)  
Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.  
All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at  
peace.

Silent Reflection  
The Assurance of Good News (unison)  
We are made and remade in every moment by that which  
Fires the Sun and Burns within our Hearts.  
Sung Response "Hallelujah. God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

### **WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Children's Hymn Growing in God's Way CSB # 90

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 13:1-9

Sermon A Year of Living Dangerously

### **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal# 743

Time for Silence  
Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer  
Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer  
Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

In this moment, draw me to yourself, God, and make me aware,  
not so much of what I've given, as of all I have received and  
so have yet to share. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant Hymnal # 539

+ Commissioning (unison)

Go forth with peace enough to want and work for more,  
with joy enough to share,  
with awareness that is keen enough to sense God's presence  
here, now, there, then, always.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle) Hymnal #433 v.3

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

+ Postlude

### **WORSHIP NOTES**

Call to Worship is by Ted Loder, Guerrillas of Grace p. 21 (adapted)

Opening Prayer Ibid. pp.100-101

Prayer of Dedication Ibid. p.83 (adapted)

Commissioning Ibid. p.62