

Eric Dupee

3/20/22, Year C, Lent III, Luke 13:1-9 "Grace Period"

On July 8, 1741 the Congregational theologian Jonathan Edwards was the guest preacher at a church in Enfield Connecticut. He preached a sermon he had previously delivered at his own church in Northampton Massachusetts titled: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

In "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Jonathan Edwards argued that God could cast the wicked into hell at any moment, the wicked being those who reject Jesus or who live lives of idleness, or drunkenness, or debauchery. He said that, without warning, God could allow Satan to seize the wicked as his own. If not for God's merciful restraint, at any time, the souls of the wicked could be cast into a fiery hell forever.

They don't write them like that anymore! Not only did that sermon contain one of the greatest sermon titles of all time, it was a catalyst for what is known as the First Great Awakening. The Great Awakening was a period of spiritual revival that took place in the 1730s and 1740s. Preachers like George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Samuel Moody, right here in York, ignited a religious fervor in both Europe and in the 13 colonies. There's a painting depicting Samuel Moody hanging in fellowship hall. He appears to be in the middle of a typical "fire and brimstone" sermon.

In the life of faith, we live with a tension between God's anger and God's mercy. There is a dynamic between God's judgment and God's forgiveness. The idea of an angry God or a God who judges human beings might not fit easily with your belief or with mine, but I would suggest there's a place for it.

What good is a God that doesn't get angry at abuse and injustice? When Bishop Desmond Tutu was fighting apartheid in South Africa, he once said, "God sees. God hears. God takes sides." Anyone fighting evil or tyranny wants God to be angry. It's a sign God is paying attention. We want a God that sees, hears, and takes the side of the weak and the needy.

We have some tough words from Jesus today. There were some who told him about an incident in which some Galileans were murdered while making sacrifices in the Temple. There was a belief that sin was the cause of terrible events in people's lives. Those who were slaughtered must have sinned in some way.

Those who approach Jesus, figured they got away free and clear. Since they were still alive, their own sin must not be so bad. Jesus said, “No.” Those poor people did not die because they were worse sinners than any other Galileans. In fact, if you don’t repent of your own sin, you will perish as they did.

For added emphasis, Jesus names an incident in which some Galileans died when a tower collapsed on them. Again, Jesus made the point. Don’t assume those who died were bad, and because you’ve avoided tragedy, you’re okay. Again, he said, “But unless you repent [of your sin], you will all perish just as they did.”

These are tough words. This is not the little baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. This is grown up Jesus. If we don’t repent, if we don’t change our thinking, if we don’t begin to see things as God sees things and live accordingly, we will be struck down.

Honestly, this is not a theology that I readily embrace. I’m just trying to mine this text for something we can take away and I think it might be this. I think Jesus is saying don’t play the comparison game. Don’t assume that **you’re** doing fine, just because **your neighbor** is doing worse.

Just because Russia is the big villain right now, don’t forget that your own country has some shortcomings. I think what Jesus is saying is don’t play the comparison game. Do your own work. Correct your own paper. Acknowledge your own sins and shortcomings and repent of those.

Then Jesus tells a parable. This poor fig tree. Three years was the normal time for maturation of fig trees. Normally they bear fruit annually, usually from early spring until late fall. For three years, the vineyard owner came looking for figs, found none, and finally decided to cut down the tree. Why should it waste good soil?

In the Old Testament, the fig tree was a symbol of peace, security, and prosperity in Israel. A fruitful fig tree is a blessing; a barren fig tree as a curse. The barren fig tree probably represented God’s judgement on Israel, for corruption in the Temple, lack of concern for those in need, and generally not living in the way that God instructed them.

This is a harsh scenario. There are different ways to interpret the parable, but Jesus could be depicting God as angry with Israel. They were not bearing the fruits of

repentance. The problem: year after year, the fig tree fails to bear fruit. The solution: cut it down. The fig tree had its chance. If failed to produce. Judgment is passed.

However, a gardener steps in and pleads on behalf of the tree. “Give me a year. Let me dig around it. Let me spread around some manure. If, after a year, it still fails to bear fruit, cut it down. But give it one more year.” I love this, because the gardener negotiates a grace period.

Don’t we all need a grace period every now and then? If I remember correctly, last year, they allowed us to file our taxes after the April 15 deadline. It was a grace period for all of us who were struggling and having trouble getting everything together.

One of the reflections in our Lenten daily devotional was about snow days. There was a time or two when I didn’t do my homework or I failed to study for a test only to have school canceled because of snow. It’s such a glorious feeling to get that reprieve, to have a little more time to get it together.

I like to think the gardener in the parable is Jesus acting on behalf of that poor fig tree. Maybe it grew with a condition that doesn’t allow it to bear fruit. Maybe, for whatever reason, that particular tree just needed a little more time to produce. Jesus stood for the right of that fig tree to exist, even though it didn’t satisfy the expectations of the vineyard owner.

My sense is that a lot of us need a grace period. I can’t tell you how many conversations I’ve had, over the last two years, with people who struggled mightily just to get by. “Pastor Eric, I’m juggling so many things while dealing with this pandemic. I don’t feel like I’m doing anything well, but that’s just the way it’s going to be. Pastor Eric, I’m overwhelmed and exhausted. Don’t ask me to do one more thing. Pastor Eric, I feel lousy and I’m not apologizing. It’s okay to not be okay.”

This is a good time to extend one another a little grace. At this time when everyone is fighting a tough battle, let’s reserve judgment. If there is someone in your life who has not lived up to your expectations recently, perhaps offering the benefit of the doubt is in order. Consider a grace period for them.

I was thinking about the church as the fig tree. We’ve been through a lot over the last two years. This church, like most, was pretty much shut down. We’re in the business of gathering people together and we haven’t been able to do that well for two years.

It may take some time to recover. We might not be able to go from 0 – 100 instantaneously. I say, let's not judge ourselves based on this next year. Perhaps we should give ourselves a year to regroup and to determine what being a faithful church will look like going forward.

Imagine what a cease-fire would mean for the people of Ukraine. There's no one who could use a grace period right now more than them. I think we can all use a grace period right now, but no one more than the Ukrainians.

Today's scripture reading has some troubling imagery. It suggests that God's judgment can come swiftly and decisively. If it reminds us that time is short and the time is now to make things right, to make up for missed opportunities, and to live each day is a gift from God, then the parable will have done its work.

I don't know if you and I are "sinners in the hands of an angry God." That might be a worthwhile thing to contemplate. But I know this. We have a savior who believes in grace periods. We have a savior that's willing to get its hands dirty, nurturing, and caring for the struggling fig trees of this world.

We are all people in the hands of a graceful Savior.