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United Methodist Church

March 7, 2010 “Another Chance?” Rev. Rusty Butler Luke 13:1-9

Can I tell you something about preparing a sermon? You may know this...sometimes preachers don't have a clue. Oh we may try and pull a fast one on you with some fancy footwork and throw in some scholarship here or there. Pastors can sometimes be clever and cunning when it comes to making the sermon sound and taste sweet like honey...but when it comes right down to it...we don't have any better idea than anyone else. You'd probably be better off just reading it yourself, deciding what you think the scripture is about. It reminds me of a story told by Will Campbell this old Baptist preacher.

He had a walking cane, did any of you ever have someone you knew who had a walking cane? My grandfather had a walking cane.

Well...Will was

at an airport. Well, I walk through the upright sensor and the cane doesn't set off an alarm because there is not a gun in it. Not even a sword. Just a piece of wood. The guard-the fellow who had been empowered-had a badge, you know-told me to go back and put my cane on the roller after I had walked through the upright sensor. Well, that didn't make any sense to me but I went back and put it on the roller. And then I stood there. He said, "Now come on through and get your cane.

I said, "No, no. If you don't mind bring it back to me. Now I have done what you asked me to do so will you do what I'm asking you to do?"

He said, "Mister, can you walk without that cane?" By then people were backed up behind me clearing their throats, 'bout to miss their airplane don'cha know.

I said, "We don't pay you to ask medical questions. That's a different specialty. They're called physicians. Just bring the cane back." He was getting mad and I was somewhat out of sorts myself When I got home and told my wife about it she accused me of being mildly in the

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grape but I wasn't. Just vexed.

Finally he said, "Mister, if you want your cane you're going to have to come down here and get it."

I said, "All right. Whatever you say." Then I got down on my belly and crawled the length of the roller. With that people were hissing and booing him. "... Making that poor old man crawl to get his walking cane." Then, he said, I pushed myself up and with a palsied hand got the cane, gave it a sassy little twirl and walked on down the corridor, leaving him standing there to face the crowd.

My wife said, "Why do you do things like that?"

"Because," I said, "I'm a Baptist!! I come from a long line of hell-raisers. I was taught that I wasn't a robot, that I was a human being with a mind, capable of reason, entitled to read any book, including the Bible, and interpret it according to the ability of the mind I was given. That's why I do things like that."

I think that's good, we should just interpret the bible according to the ability of the mind's we were given. We can't do better than that.

But sometimes there will be a scripture, like the scripture today...it will be tough. What does a person say about something like this...Jesus says, "Repent or perish." Says it twice. He's not kidding around. I know some churches like all that. They like to focus on the perishing. How can that be Good News? Doesn't make sense to me...but you know to each his own.

O God, we pray for wisdom and clarity when it comes to the difficult stories. May our efforts be rewarding. Amen.

Outline:

This is not an easy scripture...

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Repent or Perish? That seems kind of harsh in light of the idea that Jesus came to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, give sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free.

But you know, sometimes Jesus stories are not so easy to listen to, he's not Jesus meek and mild...he's been giving it to them.

Jesus has been on a tear. He's told them to be dressed for action and keep your lamps lit. He said, I've come to bring fire to the earth and oh how I wish it were already kindled. Do you think I've come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you but rather division...father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter in law and so on. He's tearing them up. It makes me wonder, who is he talking to like this? Is it the rich and powerful, is it the disciples or just the crowds that come to hear him. The last thing Luke says is that he's talking with the crowds.

So some tell him about the Galileans who's blood has been mixed with the blood of the sacrificial animals.

I don't know why they tell him that...I can't tell if it's gossip from home, or if it's information that he needs to know about and if they are expecting him to talk about how bad Pilate is, I don't know if they tell him that and expect him to get mad, or sad or explain it. I don't know.

What happens is that he looks at it and then asks a rhetorical question. Do you think they were worse than all other Galileans? No I tell you. Unless you repent you'll end up like them.

There is something called Judgment Theology. It was around then, and it is around now.

Back then people just thought God was the cause of everything. And so, if something bad happened, God did it to mete out punishment for whatever it was that someone had done wrong. It's in the book of Job and it crops up its ugly head here in Luke.

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In current times it might sound something like when Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell start to prattle on about how different areas whether it's San Francisco, or Haiti, or wherever are being punished by God for what the people do in those places.

On a more personal note it might sound like this story from Barbara Brown Taylor. Barbara Brown Taylor served for awhile as a hospital chaplain. She hated to be called to the pediatric floor. She once went in and saw a woman sitting beside an ashtray filled with cigarettes and sat down beside her. The woman told her what was going on with her child and said, "It's my punishment for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick."

It's hard to talk someone out of a theology like that. All they are doing is trying to figure out a cause for something bad, and they'll come up with something like that. I don't know how to get that out of people's heads.

Jesus tried to tell them...do you think the Galileans were worse than anyone else? No. Do you think the people killed when the tower fell were worse than anyone else in Jerusalem? No he tells them. He rejects that kind of theology. But people still hold on. It's a shame.

This story can tell us to put that Judgement theology away.

But then there's Jesus telling the people they'd better repent or perish. That seems harsh doesn't it?

Now some churches like to kind of glory in that. Repent or perish. It doesn't seem like United Methodist Churches emphasize that kind of thing. But maybe you've been in some other Methodist churches that like to do that.

When you read the 12 and thirteenth chapter of Luke you'll see Jesus on a tear.

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He tells them you'd better repent or you'll perish. It's stronger than the way I'd put it. I'd say something maybe you'd better change cause you don't have much time, you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Not Jesus, Repent or Perish. Man that is tough. For those of us who are procrastinators, there's probably something very vital in that message. Get with it ...right now!

Then there is that little parable at the end. It can be read as harsh too. If the fig tree doesn't produce fruit in the next year. It's going to be cut down. But here's the mercy part. It's got a year!

Do you like that? Give us a little breathing room. Oh we've got a year. Thank goodness.

Have you ever had a reprieve? Do you remember back to when you were supposed to have a paper due on Monday but then a blizzard came and school was called off and you got an extra day to get it done? Or maybe you were trying to purchase something special or get on a flight to go somewhere and all the options seemed to be out and then someone says..."oh, wait a minute, I think we've got something over here, we can take care of you this way." We've probably all had something like that happen. Oh, what sweet relief!

Of course there are those times and then there are the more difficult times, times when you've yelled at your child in such a way that you don't think they'll ever forgive you but sure enough, days pass and they forgive you and you are healed, or maybe a friend has been given a terrible diagnosis and it is just so hard for everyone but then, the chemo works out and they start a long period of remission.

Another chance.

We all look for another chance.

There was a notice printed in the window of a coal store in Nottingham England.

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It read, We have been established for over a hundred years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of coal nationalization, coal rationing, government control, and bad payers. We have been cussed and discussed, lied to, held up, robbed, and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next.

That seems to me to be a good line for the church.

Maybe just maybe we will bear some fruit. Another chance, maybe that's what we all need. Just one more chance.

I don't know which lesson speaks to you out of scripture. Could be getting that bad theology off the table, there is something to be said for that. It could be getting the idea that you've got to change your ways or you'll lose what ever is good in your life. It could be that God and life will give us another change, that there really is something like mercy in the world.

Whichever way it is, I trust you to figure it out for yourselves. Because you're Methodists.

Amen.