

“What Time Is It?”

Luke 13:6-9

3rd Sunday in Lent

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Jesus just told a parable about deadlines.
How are you with deadlines?

Do you like them?
Do you thrive on them?
Do they make you a nervous wreck?

Any pastor who steps into a pulpit knows the power of a deadline.

I have a recurring dream...not that you need to know this, but I suspect many pastors have some version of this dream...of arriving at church on a Sunday morning, and it's 5 minutes before worship, and I suddenly realize that I failed to prepare a sermon.

Nothing like a weekly deadline to mess with one's unconscious!

Jesus told a parable about deadlines.
You remember the parable.

A man has a fig tree planted in his vineyard.
For three straight years, this fig tree produces no fruit.
The owner says to his gardener: The tree is useless! Cut it down!
The gardener replies: Let me tend to it. Give it one more year.

So on the one hand, it's a parable about deadlines—one more year!

On the other hand, it's a parable about patience, and having a bit more time, about the gift of being given more time.

Do you know about that gift?
The gift of receiving...a bit more time?

In the early days of the second Iraq war, a correspondent for *Time* magazine named Michael Weisskopf was with a convoy in Baghdad. Suddenly, a small, dark, oval and shiny object landed on a bench two feet away.

He reached for it, he started to toss it, but it exploded, and even though Weisskopf had saved the convoy, he lost his hand to the grenade.

It was a loss that changed his life, and not just because he had to get used to having a HOOK instead of a hand.

Before the accident, Weisskopf was very career driven. He says he went to Iraq because it was a once-in-a-lifetime story. It fed his desire to achieve, his need to prove his self-worth.

After the accident, Weisskopf changed his tune.

He writes that it took “a major loss for me to understand what I meant to others. Relationships rescued me...I received...help not because of a grade I had earned, a story written...;
[I received help just] for being me.”

“I resolved to return the love by being less self-absorbed.”

One winter day after returning from Iraq, he went sledding with his children. He stood at the bottom of the hill and looked at his kids, noticed how their snowsuits sparkled in the sunlight.

His son and daughter shouted at him, “Watch this, Dad.”
“Did you see me, Daddy?”

Weisskopf says he waved at his kids, and suddenly he was crying, because he realized how close he had come to never hearing those words from his kids again.¹

Jesus told a parable this morning.
It's a parable about being given more time.
But it's also a parable about how we live our lives in the time that we've been given.

A fig tree bears no fruit.
The owner says it will never grow fruit.
The gardener says—I think it can bear new fruit.

It's a parable that asks us to examine how we spend our time. Right before this parable, Jesus is talking about repentance. About making a change in our lives.

Now I know, I know...that word repentance sounds...so dreary.
But it's not just saying that you're sorry.
Repentance is about new beginnings, new possibilities.
It's about starting over, about bearing new fruit.

So here's a question for each of us to consider this third Sunday in Lent:

**Where is the fig tree in your life?
I'm talking about the one...that's bearing no fruit.**

What part of your life (and we all have a part like this)—what part of your life is immature, or scared, or struggling...and in this area of

¹ Michael Weisskopf, "My Right Hand," *Time*, October 2, 2006.

life, you suspect you're not living like the person whom God created you to be?

The author Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote about the time that she asked another woman in her church to partner with her, so they could help one another with the spiritual discipline of repentance and bearing new fruit.

After deciding to start small...We clarified what we wanted to change (I wanted to be on time for my appointments) and we clarified why it was important (I wanted to be a person of my word, and I also wanted to do something about my compulsion to cram too many things into too little time, which is how I act out my idolatrous fantasy of omnipotence).

Next we picked one or two specific actions that would support us to make the changes we wanted to make...Finally, we agreed to call each other every Sunday to report on how things were going.

This last step turned out to be the kicker. There was a huge difference between saying (to myself), "I want to be on time for my appointments this week" and saying (to someone else), "I will call you on Sunday to tell you whether or not I was."

My partner never badgered me...Her job was simply to keep reminding me what I had said I wanted, and to help me explore my enormous resistance to change."²

Jesus told a parable this morning.

I've named a few different things that this parable is about.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000.

It's a parable about repentance, making a change.
 It's a parable with good news: we still have time to change,
 we still have time to grow.

And it's a parable about having a deadline to make that change.
 Hmm.
 What's the deal with the deadline in this parable?

“Sir, let it alone one more year...If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

That's what the gardener says, and it's the **one more year part** that makes my anxiety rise.

When Jesus asks me to change something in my life, I typically reply to Jesus in the following way: I'll do it, Jesus. Just give me time, Jesus. I'm awfully busy with my responsibilities at the church right now, Jesus. And I've got a family to look after, Jesus.

If I don't get to it this Lent, how about next Lent?

See, it doesn't bother me to hear a parable about how I need to repent. It doesn't bother me when I hear Jesus whispering in my ear that I need to grow, in this way or that way. Heck, there are parts of my life that Jesus has been whispering in my ear about for YEARS, telling me, over and over again, that this particular part of who I am is the primary area in which I need to grow!

Truth be told, I don't always WANT to grow in the ways that Jesus would like me to grow, but then I remember it's not only Jesus who is doing the asking.

It's Jesus who is doing the judging.
 Doesn't Jesus say I'll be forgiven?
 Doesn't the gospel teach us that grace abounds?

That's why this deadline business bothers me.

Deadlines create additional stress.

Deadlines mean judgment.

Deadlines mean that my time is limited.

And maybe that's the kicker.

It's NOT an easy thing for any of us to admit that we do not have all the time in the world. So how will we use this very precious gift?

Do I spend my time climbing another ladder of success?

Or trying to increase my income?

Or making sure that my child attends a good college?

Nothing wrong with those ambitions.

The only problem is, Jesus never talked about being more ambitious. Jesus never spoke about making sure that we live in a nice home, and drive a nice car, and take nice vacations...

What Jesus talked about—again, and again, and again—was REPENTING. Changing. Growing into the child of God that God created us to be.

Let me get at it like this.

A number of years ago, one of our friends went out in his boat on the lake. He took his 3-year-old daughter with him, and his daughter's grandmother, his mother, went with them too.

His daughter somehow got hold of her father's phone when Dad wasn't looking, and she reached over the boat with the phone, and she dropped it—splash!

Into the lake.

So grandma watches her granddaughter, while Dad dives in, swims under the boat, around the boat, next to the boat—but the phone is nowhere to be found.

New iPhone, lost in the lake.

Dad buys a new phone.

Two weeks later, Dad is at home by himself with his four kids. And he's changing the youngest one's diaper. And his 3-year-old, same daughter from the boat, she comes up to the changing table. And Dad takes the diaper that he's just changed, and Dad wraps it up and puts the used diaper on the floor.

And he says to his daughter, "Would you please put it in the trash?"

And his daughter disappears from the room.

Dad gets done putting the new diaper on his child, and he looks down—and the old diaper is still on the floor.

Why didn't his daughter put the old diaper in the trash?

So...Dad puts the old diaper in the trash himself and takes the full trash bag out to the trash container behind the house.

An hour later, Dad is looking for his new iPhone.

Why can't he find his new iPhone?

And then he has this memory...this memory of changing the diaper, and looking at his daughter and asking her to put it in the trash...and when he asked daughter to put it in the trash, what do you think she was playing with?

Dad's new \$300 iPhone.

So Dad RACES to his daughter—what did you put in the trash?
Your cell phone, daddy—just like you asked me to.

And Dad goes out to the back and is bent over the dumpster, picking through the trash when Mom comes back home.

Now—is it his daughter's fault that she mistook this very valuable thing, a new iPhone, for something that goes in the trash?

No, of course not.

But it's a whole other story when you and I mistake something that's very valuable—like the time that we've been given—as something we'll always have.

And we begin to take that gift for granted.

Not too long ago, a sportswriter named Sapan Deb wrote about a topic much more important than sports. He wrote about calling his mother on Mother's Day.

It might not sound like much, but in Deb's case, it had been 4 years since he last spoke with his mother. At that time, their interaction had ended in anger. And that anger led to silence, and that silence turned into one year, then two, then four.

Growing up, he says he lived in a toxic home environment, one that “oscillated between my parents’ fighting and silence.”

By the time he and his brother reached their adult years, his older brother had cut off all communication with their parents...but the silence “gnawed” at Sopan Deb.

“A prerequisite to ending any estrangement is at least one party wanting to reconcile,” he writes.

So after that Mother’s Day phone call, they began to see one another, to spend time together. At times the mood was light, other times it was serious.

“The conversations were challenging,” he admits, “and sometimes hit dead ends. Often I needed to look in the mirror as much as I needed [her] to see me.”

“Some schisms take a long time to fix,” he goes on. “But I take comfort in knowing that I am taking all the steps I can toward reconciliation. I hope my [mother] feels the same.”³

Now I have no idea what Sopan Deb’s religious affiliation is, or if he even has one. I do know what Jesus would say he did.

He repented.

He grew. He used his time...WISELY.

The celebrated business consultant Jim Collins tells the story of a construction project he once had going on.

³ Sopan Deb, “After 4 Years of Silence, a Call to Mom on Mother’s Day,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2020, found at [Opinion | After 4 Years of Silence, a Call to Mom on Mother’s Day - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/opinion/after-4-years-of-silence-a-call-to-mom-on-mothers-day.html).

The contractor did exquisite work, but the project had run into a problem. It was moving way too slowly during the summer months, which was the very time that it should have been moving more quickly...

Collins said to the contractor:
“We need to set a deadline.”

The contractor came back the following week.
“How about October 31?”

“That’s an unacceptable deadline,” Collins responded.

“But it’s an extremely aggressive deadline,” the contractor replied.

“No, you don’t understand my point,” replied Collins. “The deadline is too aggressive. We both know that there’s almost no chance you can hit October 31, which renders it utterly useless as a deadline.”

“Okay,” replied the contractor, “how about next March 31?”

“What time on March 31?” asked Collins.

“You want an exact time?”

“Yes. Otherwise, how will we know with one hundred percent certainty that you hit it?”

“Okay, how about March 31 at 5:00pm.”

“That sounds much better,” Collins replied.

The project proceeded along, and one clear-blue, seventy-degree September day, Collins noticed that it was 3 o clock in the afternoon, and the crew had not really accomplished much that day.

So he said to the contractor:

“How’s it coming with the deadline? You know, one of these days, the weather is going to turn.”

“We’re working to hit your deadline,” said the contractor.

“No, it not my deadline,” Collins replied, “it’s YOUR deadline.”

With that, the pace quickened!

And on March 31, with 15 minutes to spare, the work was complete at 4:45pm. The contractor hit his deadline.⁴

How many of you have ever had a construction project of some type done for your home?

That’s a very valuable, expensive thing, right?

Not everyone has had that experience.

So how many of you have an iPhone?

Also a very valuable thing.

Now...no need to show your hands with this. But how many of you have some area of your life, or a relationship, in which you could grow, change, repent...and perhaps, by God’s grace, bear new fruit?

May I suggest that in God’s eyes, that is the most valuable thing?

Let me invite you think about a couple of things.

⁴ Jim Collins & Bill Lazier, *Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0*, Portfolio/Penguin, 2020.

Number one: what's the next step?

In this part of your life in which you need to make a change, in which you can grow in your love for family and friend...or neighbor and stranger, so that your love becomes more mature...what is the next step?

Number two:

What's your deadline for taking that step?

(Amen.)