

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
March 7, 2010
Words of Comfort and Words of Threat
Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9

“Ho, you who have no money, come and buy. You who are thirsty come and drink. You who are hungry come and eat! Come, buy. What? You have no money? You don’t need money. These things are both priceless and free!” What is it?! “Rich food for the spirit, deep forgiveness, an everlasting covenant, the steadfast, sure love of God.”

The words of Isaiah are very comforting aren’t they? Isaiah calls us to abundant life, in relationship with a God who loves us unconditionally.

Comforting words.

But then, what about the words from Jesus? “Did the people massacred by Pilate, or the ones crushed by a tower, deserve it to die more than you? No, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. You will deserve to be cut down like fig trees that bear no fruit.” Threatening words. This is not our usual impression of Jesus and how he talks of God.

In our adult study class we talked about the impression we are sometimes given that the Old or Hebrew Testament portrays a God who is stern and forceful, harsh and punishing. On the other hand, the New or Greek Testament God seems loving and forgiving, warm and fuzzy.

Yet, here we see that this is a false dichotomy. Isaiah calls us to a God who freely offers abundant life. Jesus' appears to call us to choose repentance, or to be cut down as a fig tree that bears no fruit. Or does he?

Scholars believe that Jesus used parables to teach for at least two reasons. He used images of daily life, making them both accessible to people and simple to understand. But his images were also deeply symbolic, conveying meaning to those who had ears to truly listen. A tree was a familiar image because it represented both food, and the people of Israel. Owning a fruit bearing tree meant sustenance and even prosperity. Being a fruitful tree meant being a people that were faithful to God, as demonstrated by the fruits of their character, and their actions.

Before he told the parable, Jesus called the people to repent. But to repent is not just to recognize that you have done something wrong and be sorry about it, or even to look at your past actions and change your habits. Here, and many places in the Bible, repenting refers to opening your mind to a new way of seeing things, to be persuaded to adopt a different perspective, to change directions. Jesus wants to change perspectives about God, and the perceived righteousness of some of the people in his audience, to get people to change their way of seeing things and to open up possibilities.

The people of Jesus' time were taught that God punished. They were taught that when bad things happen, you are being punished for being unfaithful. When good things happen, it is because you did something to deserve it. God blessed you because you were special and righteous.

This set up a system of abuse. The haves of the society used this religious righteousness to blame the have-nots. They claimed that those who were marginalized by the society deserved it because God was punishing them.

But then comes the parable of the barren or unfaithful fig tree. It is about a whole change in perspective. If we see God not as the harsh owner of the tree, but the forgiving gardener, we can see that God wants the tree to have another chance.

Jesus asks his audience if the people who were killed were any less faithful than all the others, and he says no! We are all unfaithful, and make mistakes and fail to bear fruit. But God, the forgiving gardener tends us with gentle care, nourishes us, gives us another chance. It is not about our righteousness, it is about God's amazing love. God wants us to survive, to thrive, and bear fruit.

Jesus is reiterating Isaiah's call to the people. Isaiah's words of abundant life with God were first said to a people who were in exile in Babylon; a people who had turned their backs on God, who had been taken away from the land of milk and honey into captivity again. Yet God went with them and kept pursuing

them and offering them relationship. God wanted them to survive, to thrive and to bear fruit. And God wants us to survive, thrive and bear fruit.

Two weeks ago I told you an astonishingly awful statistic. I told you that the UCC is losing 3 churches a week. What I did not tell you was that the UCC also gains .7 churches a week. And this church is declining in membership and we face challenges. Yet I saw what you are capable of in the Festival these past weeks. Hard work, planning, cooperation, flexibility, generosity, a can do spirit, hospitality, joy and fun. You even put up with an embarrassing pastor with jack o lantern antenna on her head. There are abundant resources of amazing people here, the Spirit of God is moving among you, and yes, we added one more member today. You are a tree that can bear fruit!

As in everything in life, we have a choice. We can focus on bemoaning the loss, and assume that we are a barren fig tree that will be cut down. Or we can focus on the abundant love of God, the gardener who gives us another chance. We can choose to work with God who is always present, who provides nourishment, and wants us to survive, thrive and grow and bear fruit. You are a tree that can bear fruit!

We have a choice of scarcity or abundance. But as individuals, and as a church together, we must choose. We must choose those things that increase our fruitfulness, that support our faith and expand our mission to the people in our

lives, to our community and to the world we can keep. Those things that do not nourish us, those things that do not expand our ministry, those things that do not grow us or our church in spirit and in numbers, these habits we must give up.

We can see these as words of threat. Opening our minds to a new way of seeing things, and changing our direction can be threatening. But it can also open up possibilities. When we invite God's spirit to direct us it can lead to things that increase our fruitfulness; things that support our faith, and expand our mission to the people in our lives, to our community and to the world. This is our comfort—we can be a tree that bears much fruit!

For we are called to speak the invitation of Isaiah and Jesus; “Ho, come and receive. These things are both priceless and free!” “Rich food for the spirit, deep forgiveness, an everlasting covenant, the steadfast, sure love of God.”

Abundant life, in relationship with a God who loves us unconditionally. Let us go and work together to see how we can bring these comforting words to the world. Amen.