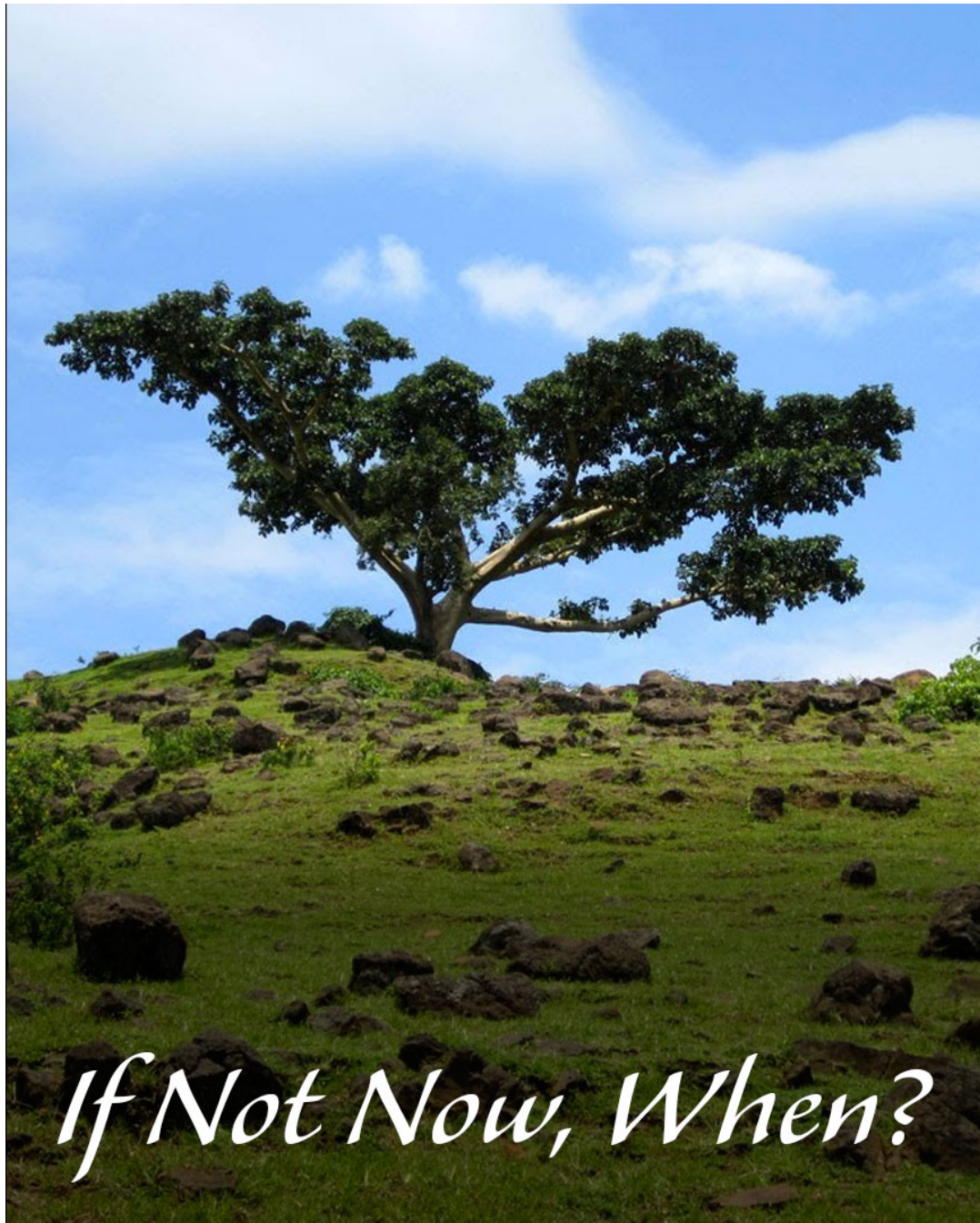


Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, February 28, 2016
Text: Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:6-9



First United
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DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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To rest under the shade of one's own fig tree was the image of contentment in Jesus' day. It probably still is in the Middle East. Across the semi-arid land where not much grows without great care, there are groves of fig trees and olive trees and vineyards producing grapes. When we hear of hostilities in the region one of the first acts of aggression is to cut down the trees of one's enemy. It destroys the person's livelihood, it ruins the soil, and it eliminates a refuge from the burning sun.

In scripture the fig tree becomes a symbol of the people of God, and fruitfulness becomes a metaphor for the people's faithfulness. So, here is the parable from the Gospel of Luke:

Jesus tells the story of a landowner who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and for three straight years the tree produced not a single fig. "Cut it down!" he tells the gardener. "Why should it waste the soil?" But he replies, "Sir, let us leave it alone one more year. I will give it special attention. I will dig around it and aerate the soil, add compost to the dirt around its roots, and let us see if it produces fruit in the next season. If so, all well and good; if not, then I will cut it down." A reprieve for the tree, but the clock is ticking. There still is time, but not all of the time in the world.

The Latin word for "dirt" is "humus." It is the root word for "human" and for "humility." If someone is "humble" we see that "she has her feet firmly planted on the ground," that "he does not have an elevated view of himself." We know that meaning from the creation story in Genesis 2. This is the second creation story in the Bible; the first is in Genesis 1, which we will get to in a moment. Here in the Garden of Eden God takes the dust of the earth (in Hebrew the word is "adamah," and this first human creature's name-to-be, "Adam"), and God forms a person and breathes life into his nostrils. We humans are made from the soil; that is what makes us "human," formed from "humus."

When we back up to the first creation story in the opening chapter of Genesis, the imagery is very different. Here we are not made from the dirt of the earth but from the elements of the universe. We are created on the sixth day, says the tradition, as God's crowning glory, just a little lower than the angels, and we are such a fitting climax to the story that God takes the next day off.

At first hearing we wonder, "How more different can these two stories be? In one we are made of the dust of the earth; in the second we are made of the stuff of the stars." Ah, but here is where the email correspondence with an astrobiologist comes in to play. It is good to have friends in high places, and in this case, working in the outer regions of the universe. Grace Wolf-Chase is an astrobiologist at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago who spends her time charting the Milky Way and beyond, pondering what is out there. She also is a devout Lutheran layperson who teaches in both the planetarium and the seminary with one foot in the universe and one foot in the Christian faith.

I was in her company a few weeks ago when she was sharing with a group of pastors the glory of the ongoing creation of new stars and planets in our ever-expanding universe. And she said that it all is a matter of dust. So, my email to her: "Please remind me of the importance of dust in the universe." She replied, "Even though dust particles make up a small fraction of what we call the 'interstellar medium' (about 1% of the 'normal' matter, which is mostly composed of gas atoms and molecules), it plays a crucial role in the formation of new stars and planets – without interstellar dust, there wouldn't be the raw materials to make new terrestrial planets (planets composed of rocky materials like the Earth). These dust particles start very small (about the size of smoke particles), but once interstellar clouds are pulled together by gravity, dust particles grow larger and larger to form aggregates."

Do you see what that means? Look under your bed and see the dust clumped up into what you might lovingly call a "dust bunny." Is that just a sign of bad housekeeping, or is God forming a new planet right there next to the sock you have been looking for?

Or, a more important meaning: when we say on Ash Wednesday, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," that is not a grim reminder of the "Grim Reaper;" it is a statement of fact. We are made of the very same stuff as the earth and of interstellar space; we need to embrace this reality and get everything out of life that God intends for us to have, not to put things off until another day. The "humus" around our roots is being enriched, but time is of the essence. Now is the time to do what is most important in life; if not now, when?

Time matters. The prophet Isaiah pleads with the people to return to experiencing the goodness of God's gift of life. "All you who thirst come to the waters. Feast on the bread and wine of God. Why do you spend money on things that do not satisfy your deepest hungers? Why do you labor for things of no consequence? Now is the time for you to incline your ear to God and listen so that you might truly live." (55:1-3)

There is a song I remember from my childhood that has never made it into a sermon . . . until now. This moment is seven decades in the making. It was written by Milton Berle, among others, and made famous by Spike Jones and his City Slickers in 1944, "Leave the Dishes In the Sink, Ma." (For those of you who do not know it, you are shaking your heads; for those of you who do know it, you are shaking your heads.) But, note the date. It is 1944 and Pa comes running into the kitchen with an airmail letter in his hand. It is from their son, Joey: "I've come back safely from across the ocean blue." He is back from the war, and Pa sings:

Oh leave the dishes in the sink, Ma, leave the dishes in the sink.

Each dirty plate will have to wait; tonight we're going to celebrate.

Leave the dishes in the sink.

Pa runs to the cellar to get the cider out of the keg, Ma gets the baloney, cheese, and pickles out of the ice box, and they invite the neighbors in to share their joy. Sy begins to play his fiddle, grandpa takes off his jacket and starts to dance, and all join in.

And while they were all dancing the door flew open wide.

And everybody stopped as Sergeant Joey stepped inside.

There is a time to leave the dishes in the sink and start dancing.

This is the gospel . . . Mary and Martha. We know of the moment when Jesus stops by their home, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus and dear friends of Jesus. One way to describe the moment is that it is dinner time; another way to identify the moment is that this is his last time with them before he is crucified, just a few days away, just a few miles down the road.

Martha perceives the moment in the first way. It is dinner and there is a lot of work to do in the kitchen with this unannounced, if always welcome, visitor. Mary understands the moment in the second way, and she sits down with Jesus to listen devotedly to what he has to say. Martha, the one who always gets things done (and thank God for the Marthas of the church, some of whom are Martins, who gets things done), she says to Jesus in a triangulating way of scolding her sister, "Jesus, send Mary here to the kitchen to give me a hand." But Jesus responds, "This time, Martha, Mary has it right. This is a special moment."

Two theories of time to interpret the same moment: "chronos" for Martha and "kairos" for Mary. For Martha this is just another chore to do in an already busy day of seemingly endless chores. For Mary this is an occasion when time stands still. It is as if Jesus says, "Leave the dishes in the sink, Martha, tonight we are going to celebrate a final moment of being together."

This is a moment in which the soil is being enriched, in which the roots are being given freedom to breathe the air and absorb the water. Do not miss it. Now is the time. If not now, when?

That is the question we must ask ourselves in this Lenten season: if not now, when? What must we do now to live life fully as God has given it to us as we were formed from the dust of the earth and the interstellar dust of the universe? We are rooted here, now what are we going to do to bear fruit? Jesus is facing his own death, and he challenges all who are willing to hear him to face their own deaths. The parable is not about gardening but about you and me.

Here is a benign example of what we all face. Several years ago I went to the dermatologist for my annual check-up. He focuses on a particular mole on my back says, "I am pretty sure that this one is cancerous. I will take a sample and run some tests. Do not worry; it is 90% sure that it will not be fatal."

What?! I had not been prepared for that. This doctor's appointment was just one more thing that I had squeezed into my calendar on that early June day, scurrying to get my errands done so that I could get back to the office and scurry to get my work done. In that moment "chronos" had just become "kairos;" all I could think of was the 10% possibility. "Do not worry; it is 90% sure that it is not fatal."

During the next few days, as the 10% took on a life of its own, I began to think of all the things I had not done yet, not what was sitting on my desk at the office, not what was on my list at home, but thank-yous that mattered, good-byes that needed to be said, hugs to give, hugs to receive, meaningful contributions of time, talent, and resources that actually would make a difference instead of the piddling stuff I had been spending my time doing every day, all day. And family . . . so much to do there that had been put off until there was time, the "right time."

I went back to the doctor for the results. I had squeezed it into my tight schedule that had me driving off to the opening session of our Annual Conference for the United Methodists in the area. He sat me down, and he said to me, "Well, I was wrong." And I thought, "Oh no, the 10%. I have never 'won' anything else before except that eight pound fruitcake that I did not want to win, and now I 'win' this malignant lottery." He said, "It is not cancerous at all. It is benign." I sensed a hint of disappointment in his voice, but I was shocked with ecstasy. I hurried home to tell the good news and drove off to the Conference.

I got there in time for the Memorial Service during which they read the names of all of my colleagues and friends who had died during the past year. And suddenly, I began crying uncontrollably. Those seated around me were respectful, certain that I was sobbing over the death of one whom had been named. But I was not crying over death but a new lease on life.

The parable of the fig tree is about a new lease on life. We will not live forever; we know that even without an annual medical check-up. We know that someday we will return to the earth from which we have come . . . remember that you are "humus" and to "humus" you shall return. That is enough to make us human, to keep us humble. But also, it is a parable that tells us that this is "kairos" time interposing itself into the "chronos" reality of our lives. This is the time; if not now, when?

If not now, when are we going to reconcile with the person whom we love but from whom we are estranged? We do not have forever.

If not now, when are we going to say “thank you”?

If not now, when are we going to say “good-bye”?

If not now, when are we going to travel to that place that feeds our soul?

If not now, when are we going to get our papers in order . . . our wills, our wishes, our financial circumstances?

If not now, when are we going to record the story of our own lives so that those who follow will not have to say, “I wish he were still around so that we could ask him what it was like to grow up where he did and why the family moved here. I guess we will never know.”

If not now, when will we do those things that give us life while we still are alive?

And in the spirit of both the Prophet Isaiah and the Savior Jesus, if not now, when are we going to turn back toward God to embrace eternal life? Eternal life is not about longevity but about intensity. It is a measure of depth, not length. It is a matter of living life fully, here and now, hugging this earthly life from which we have come and to which we will go. What happens in the next life is not up to us; what happens in this life is.

The image for contentment, for at-one-ness with God, for “atonement,” is sitting under the shade of one’s own fig tree resplendent with fruit, claiming that quiet center of our lives where the chronicle of our daily busy-ness discourages us from going. But the “kairosity” of time, when time stands still, if just for a moment, beckons to us to clarify what really matters in our lives and to do it now. If not now, when? Amen.