

May 5, 2013

A Sermon Preached by
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DELRAY BEACH

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The Truth of Our Lives

Luke 13:1-9

Will You Pray With Me?

Heavenly Father, we ask that by the miracle of Your grace, these words will address each one of us at the exact point of our need. May we encounter the presence of the living Christ and understand more deeply what life in Him means. Amen.

During my ministry in Texas there was one particular Sunday morning that six separate people needed “one minute” of my time as I made my way to the Sanctuary to lead morning worship. You understand, of course, that “one minute” rarely means one minute. Multiply that by six people and you understand how I was late for the start of the service.

Seated in the front row of the church was a five-year old boy, Nicholas, with his father. Our organist was doing a fine job at stretching out the Prelude while everyone was questioning where the pastor was. Finally, I entered the double doors that opened into the Sanctuary. As I stepped into the church, Nicholas stood

in his seat, pointed his finger at me with dramatic flair and announced with no uncertainty, “We can start now. God is here!”

What did Nicholas mean? The most obvious answer is that we can start the service of worship. But this morning I ask you to go deeper: start what? What are we doing here in worship: Sunday in and Sunday out? Really, just what is it that we are up to in this place?

I like the answer my friend Tom Long gives: worship is a dress-rehearsal for life in God’s Kingdom. It is here in worship that we learn a new language and a new way of behaving toward one another. Worship is where we learn to live differently because we once stood before a congregation like this one and said, “I believe” and was baptized.

Now there is a fundamental difference between those who believe that God exist and those who say, “I believe” and are baptized.

I believe that the earth revolves around the sun. It doesn't change how I choose to live. Yet, nearly twenty-six years ago, I stood in a church in Tampa and made a promise to a woman. I said, "I promise to love you and be faithful to you. If I am rich or poor, healthy or sick, I promise that there will be no one else." I made a declaration that I will live differently in marriage.

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When someone stands before God's people and says, "I believe in Jesus Christ" and receives baptism, it is a declaration that life will be lived differently. Life will now be lived in a manner that pleases God. The words of the Apostles' Creed are a renewal of that baptismal declaration and becomes the defining truth of our lives.

You understand, of course, that whenever someone declares belief and commitment to God there may be someone who will challenge that commitment. "Where was God when terrorists detonated bombs during the Boston Marathon? Where was God

when Hurricane Sandy destroyed so much of the east coast and the lives of many people?" These questions are not new. They are at least as old as Luke's Gospel.

Here, in our lesson this morning from Luke's Gospel, people press Jesus, "What about the good and faithful people who were killed by terrorist during worship?" Jesus answers clearly that this was not part of God's purposes and then changes the question, "Are you living within God's purposes?"

Others then press Jesus with another question, "What about the twelve people who were killed from a natural disaster?" Jesus responds again that this was outside of God's purposes and then returns to the question, "Are you living within God's purposes?" Twice, Jesus acknowledges that not everything in life is according to God's purposes and twice, Jesus presses the more important question, "Are we intentionally living according to our baptismal promise?"

Jesus now continues the conversation with a story of a fig tree. There is a fig tree that fails, year after year, to produce any fruit. The owner of the vineyard demands that the tree be cut-down and destroyed. It is taking from the land and giving nothing back.

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The gardener advocates for the tree and pleads that one more year be given for the tree to produce fruit; one more chance to be fruitful. The owner agrees to this second chance. Understand, of course, Jesus isn't really talking about fig trees. He is talking about us, we are the fig tree. We become so wrapped-up in wondering why God allows this or that to happen and pay little attention to whether we personally are advancing God's purposes. Are we producing fruit for God's Kingdom? God expects those who declare, "I believe" to produce evidence of a changed life.

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Nicholas pointed to me at the start of the service and declared, "God is here. We can start now!" Start what? It is a good question?

Tom Long once shared that early in his ministry he was teaching a children's Sunday school class. The

topic was Pentecost Sunday. Speaking in the picturesque language of the Bible, Tom spoke of how the heavens opened and a fierce wind filled the entire house of the disciples. Individual flames of fire appeared and danced on the disciples' heads. This was then followed by people speaking in languages they never even studied. In one grand demonstration, God announced that something new was happening on the earth.

Predictably, every child became wide-eyed in astonishment. That is, every child except one. There was one boy who seemed unmoved as if he had not been listening at all to the lesson of the morning. He simply sat in the classroom staring out a classroom window, trance like. Tom asked him, "Johnny, did you hear anything I said?" "Yes, sir, I heard you." "So," asked Tom, "What do you think it means?" "It means," answered Johnny, "That God didn't stay up there in heaven. It means that God came down here and is loose on the earth. It means that nothing will be the same again." Do you believe it? Amen.

