

December 18, 2011 Collegiate Presbyterian Church, Ames, Iowa

Scriptures: Psalm 90:13-17; Luke 13:6-9

### **HOW LONG O LORD!?**

**OPENING:** The parable of the unproductive fig tree is not a normal Advent reading, but it has all the ingredients for posing the Advent questions. It asks, how long do we have to get our life together. It doesn't really have quite we want, but it does have what we need. The question left hanging at the end of the parable is: "How long, O Lord—how long do we have to wait." There is the judgment theme represented in the owner of the vineyard. There is the nurturing theme represented in the gardener. The owner says, "I've had it." The nurturer says, "Give it some time for me to loosen the compacted soil, to give it some manure." But at the end we still see the parable up for grabs, It leaves us still asking, "How long O Lord!"

### **THE IMMEDIACY OF THIS PARABLE**

The parable is immediate in the sense that a memorable dream or a great poem or the conversation of a good friend who tells you the truth is immediate and important. We are every person and every part of this dream, we are the "controlling owner", we are the "compassionate gardener", we are the soil, the manure, and the tool that loosens the soil, but central to this whole thing is a sick fig tree and the absent fruit, the absent produce of the tree. We are the tree and while ignoring the shape that we are in we cry to God, "Hey Absent One, How long do we have to wait.

All of the teaching stories of Jesus, on this journey to Jerusalem, are about ordinary ingredients like salt, yeast, seeds, light and manure. None of these are a quick fix for the problem. And we don't like that very much. We love the beginnings when a baby is born, that is fresh and new and we don't have to deal with any past. We are excited at the beginning of a new pastorate, but we don't like it much when we have to wait through and Interim time.

We don't like inconvenience or interruptions or high expectations. And so we don't like very much the times we are in right now, where repairing economy and civility, and the awful brokenness of the world takes time and healing and nurturing work along with effort and patience. Jesus was best known for sticking with his people, with all of us, for the long haul. The disciples and we are all for ignoring his clear signs and clues and we merrily making up the endings we want. The people wanted Jesus to make a dramatic splash and he insisted on being ready for planting, nurturing, waiting and expecting. How long, O Lord? About as long as it takes for salt, yeast, seeds, light and manure to make a difference.

### **THE HABITS OF OUR HOLIDAYS**

There are three things many of us end up doing during the holidays. Over-functioning, perfectionism and procrastination—all are clearly part of the Christmas season.

- **Procrastination:** there are many details of our Christmas habits that we have created and consequently have a love-hate relationship with (like getting cards out, doing the baking, buying, wrapping, and holding our temper in check) So we just procrastinate. We put off what we don't like and blame our problem on anything convenient. We all have things we don't like or want to do, but realism shows us how to use our best time and energy to honestly face and do the task at hand.
- **Perfectionism:** many have to make Christmas so wonderful. We want to meet the high expectations of everyone, instead of having the realism of practicing acceptance, forgiveness, charity and humor in the midst of the season.
- **Over-functioning:** instead of delegating, and inviting others to be involved and letting new traditions replace the old, we end up not trusting anyone to do it like we can. Families and churches are alike in all of these habits. How long O Lord?

### **THE HEALING OF OUR HABITS**

So how do we change our lives? How and when do we find deliverance? How long O Lord? Werner Erhard when he did those seminars use to say, "All you have to do is to give up everything!" There would be a long pause and sly look and then he would say, "Actually you don't have to give up everything. All you have to give up is what you first thought about when I said, 'All you have to do is to give up everything.'"

A better way to go about it, is like the gardener in the parable. Pray about the fruit you want to produce. As you look for your new formation in God's spirit, be gentle and indirect about yourself. Let it take as long as it takes. Don't rush it

Pray to no longer identify ourselves with some of the structures and cultural values that are making us ill and keep us in stuck places. Others may cherish those things very much but if they don't fit us we have to let them go. We can't do it all.

And we pray to differentiate ourselves especially at Christmas time. At Christmas when we are together in the church and in our families, when we know we are growing and changing but those around us don't like that much, we risk the loneliness and loss that inevitably happens when we separate ourselves and take responsibility for our selfhood, our own growth and identity. When you change, the church as a body grows and changes and your family is invited to grow and change. When we change, we no longer call out the refrain "How Long O Lord" because we no longer expect God to be different than we are when it comes to patience.

**CLOSING:** Sister Teresa of Avila, contemporary of, but probably unknown to Calvin, was a person of prayer and worldly enjoyments. She was a large woman who loved to eat. Involved in a banquet where partridge was served, she was accused by a critic of being a glutton. She answered, "I believe this: when you pray, pray, but when you part ridge, partridge." It takes as long as it takes to be who we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.