



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Rev Bruce Sanguin

Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9

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Third Sunday of Lent

“The Economy of Grace”

Think about the two characters in the story from Luke’s gospel this morning as two different images of God. On the one hand, we have the hard-nosed owner of the orchard doing a cost-benefit analysis and concluding that the spindly fig tree is a waste of space – it’s purpose is to bear fruit and since it shows no signs of improving it’s efficiency, he gives up on it. Then we have the gardener – the appointed executioner in the tale – who is no less interested in the fig bearing fruit but is more patient. He acts as the fig tree’s advocate, saving it from immediate death. He’s not ready to give up on the tree just yet. And no mere advocate, he possesses the skills to bring the tree back to its full potential.

So naturally we all want to go with the Gardener. This God is willing to dig in around our roots, get to the source of the problem, add a little organic fertilizer to the mix, and then give us some TLC – all in order to promote our capacity, not just to survive, but thrive. Well, I happen to believe that this is a more accurate description of God’s true nature. I have even experienced the divine in this way. But in order to get to that God – I mean really get to the place where this God is more operative in our day-to-day belief system and experience – requires an exorcism of the other image of God.

All of us carry around inside of us, sometimes conscious and sometime at an unconscious level, the hard-nosed, bottom-

line, bear-fruit-or –be-gone, image of God. This has been the dominant god of Western culture for the last couple of hundred years. By now, we have internalized this god as the voice of judgment that sounds in our heads when we’re not living up to an external standard. This god values us according to our capacity to *produce*. The young are valued mainly for their *future* potential as units of production – thus explaining why our education system increasingly is about preparing our young to serve the economy, and less about making a liberal arts education universally available to all. Those who serve the young – day-care workers and the like are often paid less than what we pay others to take our dogs for walks. Likewise, our elders suffer a loss of status the day they are given the golden handshake – ours is not a culture that confers upon our elders the status of wisdom-keepers. When the purpose of life is to bear economic fruit, those who serve this purpose directly carry status and authority in our culture.

Capitalism and the emergence of the Protestant work ethic are closely tied. Max Weber, the German sociologist, was the first to make the connection. There was a time when peasants spent most of their time either celebrating or preparing for the celebration. Two-thirds of the year was given over to the “fruitless” work of enjoying themselves in festivals. Of course,

they knew the meaning of hard work. Planting and harvesting was very demanding work. But they also knew how to celebrate life. As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her new book, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, dance was a key element in the celebration of life.

Martin Luther, father of the Reformation, had no problem with dance. He admits to enjoying dance himself. But his Swiss counter-part Calvin saw it as the past time of the devil himself. To him, all these peasant festivals and all this fruitless dancing seemed like idleness and idleness became the defining characteristic of sin in the Protestant culture. As long as we were kept busy we could stay out of trouble – sexual and otherwise. Put these people in factories and give them something useful to do! Dance historically happened in church. Peasants couldn't see why church shouldn't be a festival. It was eventually banned from the church and the church's property. Then it was actively suppressed through church teaching. Ehrenreich traces very carefully the association between the suppression of dance, and the dramatic increase in depression in the Western world in the 18th and 19th century.

This was very interesting to me because I experienced it in my own life. Initiation into the adult work world was accompanied by a loss of celebration in my case. Growing up in Winnipeg I spend most of my weekends dancing – getting lost in the celebration of movement. By the time I was ready to dawn my minister's robes I remember talking to Ann about how strange it was to go out to a dinner party that was anything but a party. We sat around after dinner endlessly discussing this or that, the kids, the weather, the state of the nation,

and I was bored to death. For years I wondered when the host was going to turn the music up and clear the furniture away. But it never happened and tellingly I got depressed.

So any of us who live in the 21st century serve this bottom-line, bear fruit or be gone god. It's simply part of the air we breathe. We assume that life is about bearing fruit – defined as economic fruit – and if we happen to be unemployed, working at home raising children, or god forbid (small “g”) choosing not to work – this god has little mercy on us. Our conscience, our society and ourselves condemn us as worthless. The legacy of the marriage of the Protestant work ethic with an exclusively economic definition of what it means to bear fruit is that most of us walk around with a low-grade guilt. We take our computers on holidays, we check our emails incessantly, we bring our work home in the evening, we fret that we are not giving our children enough. We make a silent, withering judgment – we're a waste of space.

But as we heard from the book of Isaiah, God's voice reminds us: “*My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways*” (Isaiah 55:8). There is an alternative wisdom and an alternative economy– what Mary-Jo Leddy calls the economy of grace. “Come”, says this God, “*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come; buy wine and milk without money and without price* (55:1). It

sounds strange to our ears precisely because we've been so steeped in the other economy of production and we just *know* that you don't get something for nothing!

When we're serving the economy of the market – and friends don't misinterpret me here – there is absolutely nothing wrong with a market economy. Until, that is, it becomes an idol – or a false god. When this god demands that you make a sacrifice of your joy for life, your intimacy with spouse and with children, your capacity for awe and wonder and celebration, then something is amiss – something requiring repentance. But there is an alternative economy. In the economy of grace, God digs deep into the roots of our soul, fertilizing our very life system with an alternative wisdom.

The fruits of this Spirit are love, joy, compassion, service – social capital that you can't put a price on, and you can't try to produce through your own efforts. The best you can do is to receive the gracious ministrations of a Holy Gardener who is willing to go to the very roots of your soul and free up all that is preventing you from your natural birthright. If we can get this other god out of our head we may be able to hear the voice of the gardener speaking to us:

“You are a such a lovely tree. But you are failing to thrive. Don't listen to that other voice – he sees you only as a commodity, a product to meet his needs. You are not worthless. You withhold because he does not know you and you do not want him to enjoy the fruits of your beauty. Listen to me. I give you the most precious gift possible – time. Be patient with yourself as I am patient with you. I give you time to be your loveliest self, to bare fruit befitting your natural beauty. I give you this next year to turn away from all the keeps you from abundant

life, from feeling the warm breeze and the joy of being alive. You will not need to try harder to have more abundant life – the life is there for you to receive. I give you my attention so that soon you will be able to see yourself as I see you. Receive my grace and blossom, my beautiful tree.”

At the end of the service 16 people from this congregation will kneel before you witnessing to the truth that they have heard the voice of the Gardener blessing them. They declare their desire to share the fruits of grace with this community and beyond. They have discerned their spirit-given gifts, and are now ready to take their place in the economy of grace. Not to work themselves to the bone doing “church-work”, mind you, but rather to naturally bear the fruit that celebrates the loving attention of our Cosmic Gardener. They give themselves into Her strong and wise hands Who alone knows the secret of bearing fruit.