



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## The True Fig Tree

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 3, 2013*

*The Third Sunday in Lent*

*Based on Luke 13:1-9*

Lest anyone forget: we are still in Lent. Winter lingers, a new pope is being selected in the midst of tabloid fever, Detroit is crumbling, and our gospel lesson this morning is chock full of the message to repent or perish, to produce or be chopped down. It's enough to make me as the preacher want to punt, which is scary on several levels, not the least of which is my use of a sports metaphor! But in the midst of all that repenting and perishing, if one looks, some really good news is to be found. In fact, this short passage contains a couple of kernels of truth that could be life changing for every one of us, which all in all is pretty impressive for any Sunday during the year.

First a general word about repenting. It is such a churchy word, one that has been so completely co-opted by the street preacher—"Repent or Perish"—that we often look for a synonym. It is our loss if we concede the word repent for two reasons. First, it is critical in the telling of our story; throughout our history of salvation, God has been understood as calling us to repent. The word itself means to turn, to turn from one way in order to head in another way, turning from a way that is leading to destruction and ultimately death to one that leads to life and light and goodness.

Beyond history, we, the current children of God, also often need to repent. I know I do. There are areas in our lives, paths that we are following that we need to abandon, parts of our lives about which we need to repent and from which we need to turn away. But it is not easy; repentance is never easy because it involves change. Even when we know that we need it, even when we know that the path we are following is neither leading us where we truly want to go nor truly consonant with the one who we are to be created to be, it isn't easy. But to repent is to turn toward God, which though not easy is always good.

The first half of this passage contains a direct challenge to one of our most cherished cultural conclusions about the way God is in the world. In Richard Rohr's newest book, *Immortal Diamond*, Richard refers to God as the Great Allower. Our Christian culture does not like this notion and has found a way to sidestep it with the claim, honestly and piously offered, "everything happens for a reason; God has a plan; we just don't know it yet." Notice in this passage in Luke how Jesus refutes that: "Jesus asked, 'Do you think that because the Galileans who suffered under Pilate were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?'" God allows the good and the bad to fall on both the good and the bad because that is the way life is—not because there is a hidden reason for it, but because it is simply the randomness, which in the mystery of God is part of the design of creation. "We much prefer," Rohr writes, "a God of domination and control to a God of allowing, as most official prayers make clear."

***In my opinion*** our coming to understand God as an Allower is a critical step in our spiritual maturation. Granted it is not easy, for such a conceit about God requires us to admit the randomness of the world, which makes life seem further and further beyond our control. And it is. Even though we have great agency over our lives in that our choices to be smart and careful and reasonable positively affect us and protect against the randomness of life to some degree, the truth is we do not have control. Even God chooses not to control every aspect because that is not how creation works.

This is so important to us because deep inside we already know it to be true. Our experience teaches us that, and continuing to claim something that is contrary to our own experience of life splits us, creating a "religious" position that is different from a "real life" one. Admitting its truthfulness allows us, then, to confess the real spiritual experience, which is our

dependence upon the sustaining presence of God. Sure, we would love it if everything worked out just as we hoped, if God managed our lives and details so that we have charmed long lives and then at some point simply die in our sleep. But the truth is that a convention of those whose lives followed that trajectory would not require a large meeting space. Jesus said, “These Galileans were in the wrong place at the right time; it means nothing more than that.” Bad things happen, and our prayers do not protect us from them. Our prayers take us to God, who will never, never leave us alone in times of joy or tragedy. Nothing, as Saint Paul promised, can separate us from God; and in the end that promise is all that we need.

Now briefly to the famous fig tree: Jesus made his points in parables so as not to be so obvious or simple that the deeper truth was missed. No doubt Jesus knew our tendency to synthesize, codify and simplify, each important skills but often not so helpful in trying to understand Mystery. From every parable we should walk away wondering, pondering, letting the strange stories continue to work on us. “I wonder” may the holiest words we can utter when reading scripture.

In Palestine a fig tree was particularly important. In several places in Hebrew scripture the health of all of Israel was symbolized by how fruitful or not the fig tree was. Jesus hearers no doubt knew of this literary reference, and the mention of a fig tree would have immediately caught their attention. Over the years I have taken some comfort from the Gardener’s suggestion that the fig tree be given another chance, another year before being chopped down, as further evidence of the wideness of God’s mercy.

But recently reading Rohr’s new book, I came upon a new insight. The overriding point of the book is to differentiate between the True Self and the False Self. Rohr claims, as others have, that our True Self comes from God, is given to us and resides with us forever. He refers to it as an “internal humming reverence that finally must be honored.” The False Self is our creation, our persona, the sense of self we develop to meet the world in the way we think the world desires us to be. It is the part of us that wants to be noticed; it is always looking to be somewhere and some thing other than what it is, bending in the breeze of every fad or fashion. A fig tree living as an authentic fig tree is one that is prolifically fecund. The True Self of the fig tree is to abundantly produce fruit; begging your pardon for the anthropomorphism, it is the tree’s reason for being, its joy, and its purpose. In the parable the fig tree, which is not producing, is living some version of the False Self, something other than for what it was created, for true fig trees produce abundantly.

The Gardener is generous and hopes that his working the soil around the tree will wake it up to its truth in another year. Maybe it will; maybe it won’t. But what I believe Rohr’s point, and more importantly Jesus’, to be is that eventually all of us come to understand our truth, our understanding of what is real and meaningful and authentic. Rohr correctly, I believe, suggests that this shift from False Self to True Self is *the* spiritual journey of our lives. He claims, and I agree, that everyone eventually arrives at the True Self, although for many of us it takes a long time, even a lifetime. The parable of the fig tree teaches us not to waste our lives being something other than what we are. The truth is in us; the truth is what makes us who we are. We don’t create it; we are it because God has given it to us.

The judgment in this parable is that we can choose to live for a long, long time in our False Self, but eventually the ax of life may have to chop the False away so that the True Self can live. In the end this parable and all of Lent, indeed all of our spiritual journey, invite us to come home, where there is no pretense, no maneuvering but only authentic love—the union of God and the truth of each of us.

What on earth are we waiting for?

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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