

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “An Honest Look”

March 7, 2010

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#### **Luke 13:1-9**

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’*

*Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’*

How many of you watch “American Idol?” I am brave enough to admit that I sometimes watch “Antiques Roadshow” and “Ice Road Truckers” so it should not be too hard for me to confess that I have been a regular follower of “American Idol.” Please don’t be too hard on me. Part of my viewing habit was born from a desire to know what in the world my daughters were talking about!

For a variety of reasons, this year I have not yet seen a single night of “American Idol.” Perhaps I have been at the church too much on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. Perhaps I was busy watching the Winter Olympics, and that kept me away from the show.

It seems to me that “American Idol” is a popular fad which has almost run its course. I believe the cultural expression is that it has “jumped the shark.” The best part of the show, judge Simon Cowell, is leaving after this season. I know that poor Simon has taken his share of abuse from the media and from the public. He even criticized himself this week. He isn’t always a nice man. He tends not to pull any punches when evaluating a performer and his words often come off as cold and cruel, mean-spirited and arrogant. But more often than not, I think Simon is right. I usually agree with his opinion.

Some people think “American Idol’s” downfall has been caused by the loss of original judge Paula Abdul. She has been replaced this year by comedian Ellen Degeneres. But I disagree! I never understood why Paula was on the panel. She had a compliment for every contestant, even for the worst of performances. Her

encouraging words often seemed to me empty and false. I wanted to scream at her, "You're a judge. You're supposed to be critical! You're not supposed to care about people's feelings." I believe that there are some performances on the show that are just not worthy of compliments or encouragement.

My least favorite class in seminary was my introductory Preaching Seminar. Based on some of the sermons you have heard, that might not surprise you! Anyway, the professor was a very nice man. Everyone at seminary wanted him as a teacher or an advisor because he was so nice. He never failed anyone. During the course of that seminar, I know for a fact that I wrote and delivered some dreadful sermons. And during the course of that seminar, I heard some sermons from my fellow students that were far worse than mine. If you went by the expressed opinion of the instructor, then the preaching in that class was worthy of immediate publication. In his evaluations, he never, ever gave a student a negative comment. He affirmed everyone and anything. I swear that one could preach using the dictionary or phone book and my professor would love it! But because nothing critical was ever said about my sermons, I learned nothing in the class.

The Scripture lesson this week presents a real challenge to all of us. Most of us prefer to think of Jesus as a comforter, a buddy, or a pal. He is our savior, redeemer, and friend. Jesus loves us. Jesus looks out after our best interest. Like Paula Abdul and my preaching professor, Jesus affirms us and never criticizes us. He blesses us and never curses us.

But here in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke there appears to be another side to this Jesus we thought we knew and loved. He is speaking to a crowd of listeners, warning them about what is to come and the signs of the times that might predict the coming judgment. Suddenly he is interrupted by the breaking news story of the day. Several Galileans were killed by Pilate, just as they were offering their sacrifice at the temple. The tragedy was just another in a sequence of tragic news events. Earlier, eighteen people had been killed when a tower at Siloam had fallen upon them. It was like having a massive earthquake in Chile just a few short weeks after a deadly quake in Haiti. Why?

Laura was watching the nightly news this week and shook her head with disgust and sadness. There were stories of children killed in a fire, a couple murdered at home, a teen raped and murdered, all among the other tales of earthly woe. She said it was the most awful newscast that she had ever heard. Why was all of this happening?

The crowd around Jesus was moved to try and make some sense out of the disorder of the day too. Why do these things happen? Why do they happen to those to whom they happen? Perhaps Jesus' listeners were simply frightened and wanted to know that they were safe from the unexplained terror. Maybe they wanted to find someone to blame, someone to point a finger at. They talked about the abuse of power by evil Pilate. After all, if they could name the evil and find it outside themselves, then they could attack it while affirming their own goodness. The bottom line was that if they could only find something wrong in those that perished, it would serve as a reminder that such horrible things could never happen to good people like them. And that is what they really wanted to know-that this kind of thing could never happen to them.

But Jesus refused to be drawn into a discussion about who had sinned and about who or what had caused these tragedies. Instead of offering gentle affirmations that

would make his listeners feel good about themselves, he spoke to them words of judgment. "I tell you, unless you repent, you too will all perish!" Unless you honestly look at the error of your own behavior, you will eventually fall under the terrible judgment of God.

These are tough words to hear! This isn't a smiling Jesus, a promise of an easy life and a good ole back on the back! This is a blunt reminder that there is something wrong about each of us, that we all need to change and that we all need to be better people. Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "Christians in America would like to believe in a God without wrath that saves a world without sin through a Christ without a cross." We prefer words that make us feel better about who we already are than words that call us to change so we can be somebody better, somebody more like God wants us to be.

Instead of a discussion about the cause of other people's pain and the evil of the world, Jesus turned the conversation toward the very nature of his listeners. He told the story of the fig tree that does not produce any fruit. The caretaker wanted to cut it down. Yet the owner gave the tree one more year, fertilizing and caring for it again. In this story, Jesus held up a mirror to those who would listen. In the time you have left, what needs to change? Knowing the fragile nature of life, what needs to be done in your life so that you can follow my intention and live toward your created purpose? Forget about empty words that might make you feel better. Let's instead seek the tough act of repentance that will actually make you live better. Jesus does not condemn them, but he reminds them they need to change to be the kind of people God wants them to be.

I read a news item about a Georgia high school basketball team that finished last season with a record of 21 wins and 5 losses. Their last win was a come-from-behind victory in the finals, giving the school their first state championship in over 25 years. A few months later they discovered that in one of the early tournament games, one of their players was ineligible. The ineligible player was not one of the team's stars, in fact he seldom every played. During the state tournament, the player had been on the court for only 45 seconds at the end of the game, in a game whose outcome had already long been decided. The school was told to forfeit the game and return their championship trophy. The school's legal team advised the team to appeal. The opposing coach of the forfeited game offered to forfeit the game himself so that the result on the court would stand. Everyone it seemed believed the school had a reasonable excuse and should not have been punished. But the coach of the team refused to plead innocent. He didn't want an extended court battle. He said the team needed to be honest about who they were and a lesson in honesty and accepting responsibility was much more important than any trophy. Instead of finding reasons and hiding beyond excuses, he openly confessed the wrongdoing. In doing so he said he hoped to do better in the future.

Everyday God seeks to build the Kingdom on earth and in our lives. That kingdom cannot be built if we are willing only to accept the grace of God, thinking of ourselves as nice people who always mean well and deserve the best. We also need to accept God's judgment, facing a truth that demands we repent and follow, and be better people. Instead of asking why things in our world are not the way we want them to be, we need to take an honest look at ourselves and ask why we are not as God wants us to be.