

**“Our Need for Grace and a Sense of Urgency”**

**Luke 13:1–9**

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There are many tragic stories connected to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, but there are also some incredible survival stories. One of the latter involves Charles Baldwin, a man who grew up in the church I served in Winston-Salem. He was a helicopter pilot in Viet Nam who later became the Chief Chaplain of the Air Force and a Major General. Dana and I attended his second pinning at the Pentagon.

On September 11, 2001, Charlie was headed to a meeting in the part of the Pentagon that was hit, but on the way, someone asked him to stop for a cup of coffee and a brief conversation. That stop delayed his arrival and thus saved his life. Charlie felt deeply conflicted about that day. He was thankful to be alive, but he grieved the loss of friends.

Another incredible story of survival is recounted by psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz in his book *The Examined life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves*. It is the story of Marissa Panigrosso who was on the ninety-eighth floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center when the first plane hit the north tower. She felt the explosion, as hot air hit her face, and she left the office immediately. She didn't bother turning off her computer or even retrieving her purse. She walked directly to the closest emergency exit and left the building.

The women she was talking to didn't leave. Even when the fire alarm went off, many people in the office did not feel a sense of urgency. That struck Marissa as odd, but Grosz notes that people often do not react immediately when they hear a fire alarm. They wait for confirmation of some kind that the threat is real (as retold by Tracy Jessup, *Monday Mornings*, Gardner-Webb University, March 14, 2022).

I share these stories not to draw any simplistic conclusions about suffering and survival. While the Apostle Paul seems to buy into this kind of thinking in our reading from 1 Corinthians 10, wherein God zaps people left and right for their sin, Jesus rejects it.

Did the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices suffer because they were worse sinners? “No!” Jesus says emphatically, *ouchi* in the Greek. As someone has said, Jesus obliterates our ledgers on sin and suffering, he does not buy into our metrics of judgment. The last thing Charlie Baldwin would have considered was that his friends died on 9/11 and he survived because they were worse sinners.

I share these stories not to draw such simplistic and misplaced conclusions or to blame those who delayed in responding to the alarm. We have all delayed at times, and what people suffered in the wake of those attacks was horrendous. Anyone who has been in a fire or cared for those who have — I have done both — knows how terrifying an experience it is. There is no need to blame the victims.

I tell these stories to underscore the reality of grace and the need for urgency. We all experience things that simply do not depend on us — blessings from God, free gifts from the universe, pure luck — and there are times when we need to have a sense of urgency about something in our lives. All of the texts we have today echo these themes, but the reading from Luke especially talks about grace and urgency.

After rejecting the idea that people suffer because they are sinners, Jesus does not provide an alternative explanation for suffering. Rather, he underscores the need for change, for repentance, and then he tells a simple parable about a fig tree that is not producing fruit. The owner of the vineyard wants to cut the tree down, but the gardener suggests giving it more time and some added attention. “Let it alone,” he says, a word from the same root from which we get the word *forgiveness*, and it is a gift of grace. The tree is given more time to produce.

Jesus is not providing a horticultural lesson here; he is talking about the human condition. There are times when our lives are not as they should be. So, we need to change. But grace is always involved and it comes in many different forms — sometimes in straight-up forgiveness, sometimes in strength to accomplish what we cannot on our own, sometimes as more time to get things right.

Judgment is not removed from the table. The tree is only given another year. God is not like the parent who constantly threatens consequences but

never delivers. Dana's father once referred to my disciplinary approach with Ian and Ali as Big Cloud, No Rain... but I learned over time that he was projecting; he was Big Cloud, No Rain.

God is not Big Cloud, No Rain, life itself brings consequences to poor decisions, but God does constantly create space for second chances, and third chances... God extends grace again and again. We experience this most decisively through the cross, the ultimate gift of grace that covers all frailty and sin, but we also experience grace in the details of life, the incredible array of blessings we don't earn and the times we avoid catastrophe due to no effort of our own.

Anyone in a long-term, happy marriage knows what grace is. There are things we can and should do to nurture healthy marriages, but finding another person with whom we are well-matched is a gift of grace, as is the ability to change and grow together, not to mention the basic reality of both persons living for a long time.

Members of the Hiott Class have talked often about the marriages in their class. As many of you know, this class began as The Young Couples Class, but the passage of time created a need for a new name... They took the name of their beloved teacher, John Hiott, which was a wonderful choice. But many times someone in the class has pointed to how many marriages of fifty or more years their class members have enjoyed. It is incredible, and these folks have worked at their marriages. But grace has also been involved, beginning with simple reality that you cannot remain married for fifty years unless both people live that long.

Our lives are filled with grace, enriched by things over which we have no control, and blessed with the gift of second chances, more and more time to get things right. Some of you know that my mother was an English literature professor who sadly died at a young age. I have memories from early life of college students constantly coming by our house, even at Christmas, bringing paperwork, and then of my mother staying up late at night, grading papers. As I grew older, I learned why.

She cared about each student and about learning, so if students did not do well and got a poor grade on a paper or exam, she gave them a second chance, a do-over. Those who thought of everything in a competitive way may not have liked it. "I got it right the first time! I should get a better grade

than him!” My mother thought the goal was for each student to learn. So, there were always second chances.

God believes in second chances, too, do-overs, more time, grace. There may be times when we think we don’t like this, but in the end, we all depend on this. In one way or another, we all need grace.

And yet, the availability of grace is not cause for complacency. In Jesus’ parable, the fig tree that is not bearing fruit is given a finite amount of time. There is a need for urgency. The Galileans did not die because they were worse sinners, but we all need to repent. Life is short, God’s realm is near, and we are called to participate fully in it.

Our challenge is that we don’t respond very quickly to spiritual fire alarms because we don’t believe there are consequences to our actions. In the past, the faithful found teachings like those in 1 Corinthians 10, where sinners are zapped left and right by God, terrifying because they believed that God really did work this way. And knowing this, religious authorities used this threat to control people. “Give the church money and do what we say or God will strike you dead, and when you die, God will send you to hell for all eternity!” That’s powerful motivation.

But we don’t believe this anymore, and for good reason. We don’t believe in a God who works like this, and it is obvious that many of the most flagrant sinners in the world do not encounter serious consequences, or if they do, it is either in the next life or only after inflicting harm on the masses for a long time.

Hitler eventually took his own life, but only after taking the lives of millions. Putin may eventually get what he deserves, but he may not, and even if he does, after how much devastation and moral depravity? If God ever zapped people for moral indiscretions, God certainly doesn’t do so anymore. So, are there are no consequences? Is there anything for us to fear? Is there any sense of urgency about our need to change?

Well, there are consequences, sin has its own consequences. As the reward for living in relationship with God is living in relationship with God, the punishment for turning our back on God is living without God. The realities associated with not changing ought to inspire a sense of urgency, but they don’t always do so.

On a cultural level, think about climate change. The data are undeniable, even military authorities agree that it poses the biggest threat to all life on this planet, and yet most people are not responding to the fire alarms. It's just another issue to debate and politicize.

Or consider the history of racial injustice and the systemic consequences we still live with but which many deny. In his book *White Too Long* Robert P. Jones talks about the "willful amnesia" White Christians have about racism and white supremacy. He tells many stories to illustrate the point including one about a Sunday morning in 1906 in Springfield, Missouri, when a mob of 3,000 white men lynched three black men in the town square. That Sunday happened to be Easter. It took over 100 years for the community to acknowledge this evil day, but in 2018 a memorial was finally established with a plaque that reads, "They hanged them. They threw kerosene on them. They burned them to a crisp. And then they went to church."

There are those who say this is ancient history. It is not. Racially motivated violence continues to litter the headlines. But perhaps just as unsettling, the more subtle consequences of our racial history continue to shape our society while many fight to shut down any conversation or education about them. The resistance to acknowledging wrong and expressing remorse is another fire alarm, a warning that something is off, something that ought to inspire a sense of urgency, but does it? Whether in regard to significant cultural and global concerns or issues in our own lives, we need to pay attention to the fire alarms.

And perhaps we need to return to the point at which we began. A sense of desperation about our condition can motivate us, but the possibility of something better is even more helpful. Anticipating next week's story about the prodigals, hitting rock bottom led the younger son to come to his senses and leave where he was, but what motivated him to return home? The knowledge that his father treated even the servants with dignity and respect. So, he knew he could count on grace.

Such is our place before God. We can always count on grace. And in the context of grace, we can move toward something better in our lives, seek a more just society, and live as better stewards of the earth. Along with a bit of urgency, that's all the motivation we need.