



feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading. (Isaiah 40:11)

April 24, 2013

Dear Church Family,

We read Luke 13:10-14:24 as Jesus fulfilling his role as the vinedresser in the parable of the fig tree (13:6-9). His heart is expressed in his lament over Jerusalem, *“How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”* Jesus’ desire is to help people avoid judgment, to make trees fruitful so they will not be cut down. Here is the mystery of God wanting all to be saved, but there is a role for the human will that is necessary. The logic that leads to universalism, that all will be saved because that is God’s desire is refuted in this passage of Luke. Whatever someone might say about how logical, reasonable and desirable it is to believe that all will be saved; one has to admit that in this passage Jesus is clearly operating from the understanding that this is not true. That people will miss out and he is doing all he can to save those people. Jesus has brought a way to escape judgment. It is a narrow door, but it is open to all that would enter through it. But it is only open for a season, just like the fig tree only has one year. There is coming a time when the door will be shut and people will no longer be able to enter through it.

This is not how we are accustomed to thinking about Jesus and his ministry. In our present day culture that champions the virtues of acceptance and affirmation, Jesus’ ministry, especially his eating with sinners, is often portrayed as primarily one of acceptance. Yet here in Luke, Jesus explicitly rejects an appeal for entrance through the shut door based on the fact that *“we ate and drank in your presence.”* As I stated last time, Jesus does not just love sinners, wanting to accept them as they are. He also loves his holy Father God. His ministry is not about acceptance but rather reconciliation, reconciling our sinfulness with God’s holiness. That is the narrow door that he provides and it is through confessing and repenting of sin that people enter through it. In his ministry on earth, Jesus had to endure the work of the cross to provide the narrow door, convince people that the door he provided was open to them, and convince them of their need to enter through that door.

The synagogue ruler threatens Jesus’ ministry because he publicly rebukes Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. He is in effect sending the message that Jesus cannot be trusted as a man of God. Thankfully, Jesus is able to handle this threat very effectively with his wisdom, *“so that all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him”* (13:17).

Jesus then teaches that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or leaven. The point of this teaching is clear: the kingdom of God will start out small and seemingly inconsequential, but it will become large and powerful. What is not so clear is why Jesus gives this teaching in this context. Yet the beginning of verse 18, *“He said, therefore”*, indicates that there is a connection with what has just happened. And what has just happened was a miraculous healing and everyone rejoicing in the glorious miracles that Jesus has done. How could such dramatic miracles be viewed as small and inconsequential? Only in light of the understanding that they are evidence of the presence of the Kingdom of God. (11:20, *“if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”*) From that perspective, the glorious miracles that Jesus is doing are very small, like mustard seeds, compared to what the Kingdom of God, fully present, would look like. Jesus knows that his miracles are small in the context of the present age where Satan continues to oppose the kingdom of God. There remain many more who are still under the bonds of Satan than those who are miraculously released in his ministry. And this might be grounds for people to doubt his claim to be bringing the kingdom of God.

This is precisely what we saw back in chapter 7 with John the Baptist. John hears about the glorious things that Jesus is doing (including raising a widow's son from the dead) and then asks "*Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?*" How can it be that John has trouble recognizing Jesus as Messiah? Because John is in prison while all this is happening. If Jesus really is bringing the kingdom of God, then John would not be in prison (literally bound in prison) by Herod. Where is his freedom? Jesus acknowledges that John has reason to have difficulty with what Jesus has brought when he says, "*Blessed is he who is not offended by me.*" The offense, or cause of stumbling, would be that what Jesus has brought is too small. It does not impact John's situation and suffering.

We can apply this to our lives. Praise God for the times when we rejoice in the glorious things that God does in our present age that are clear indicators of the presence of the kingdom. But there will also be times when we are not experiencing that. Times when the presence of the kingdom is too small because it is not yet impacting our situation with deliverance from Satan's influence. Times when things are not as they are supposed to be when the kingdom of God is present. And in those times we are tempted to doubt or lose our confidence as we saw last week in Stuart's sermon on Psalm 27. Jesus is preparing people for those times, acknowledging that the kingdom will seem small and not powerful enough. If we apply this teaching, rather than giving up and losing hope, we have cause to wait on the Lord because a better future is promised. The mustard seed becomes a tree and the leaven eventually impacts the entire batch of flour.

In chapter 14, Jesus is interacting with the Pharisees again. From their last exchange in chapter 11 ("*full of greed and wickedness*", "*unmarked graves*") we may have thought that Jesus was finished with trying to minister to them. However, even though they are under a sentence of God's judgment, Jesus is the vinedresser still trying to bring them to repentance before it is too late. You will need to listen to the sermon to see how he is doing this.

I do want to highlight the call to emulate Jesus who is able to operate with judgment, but not condemnation. How do we react when we see someone's sin or error, seeing them as God does as opposed to how they see themselves or present themselves? Particularly if that person, like the Pharisees, believes that they are righteous. I think we can tend toward an attitude that they deserve the judgment that they will face. There is some truth in that, because they do in fact deserve the judgment they will face for their unrepentant sin. But do we have Jesus' attitude toward them? For Jesus, his awareness of their sin and false, hypocritical confidence in their righteousness (which he is far more aware of than we are) does not lead to condemnation. He sees their need for repentance and is committed to helping them avoid the fate they so richly deserve. We are called to follow Jesus as the vinedresser with the fig tree who is keenly aware of God's judgment and is committed to helping people to escape it. "*All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*" (2 Cor 5:18).

Pastorally Yours,

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<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)