

The God of Second Chances

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church March 23rd, 2025 – Luke 13:1-9)

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In the 1990's I met a teenager who seemed to spend his life high on pills. When he wasn't adversely affected by pills and other substances, he was stealing from people, so that he could pay for his habit. I met him through a program, that worked with young people who were in youth prison or just about to leave, having served their time. As part of their rehabilitation, they played sport each week with a volleyball team which I coached. One night I had to play, so I asked him to look after my keys and wallet.

I never used to ask the kids what they were inside for, thinking that if they chose to tell me that would be fine, but I didn't want to use all that prior knowledge to judge them - I wanted to treat them as ordinary people until they acted to make me believe otherwise.

I was putting into practice my belief, that if these young people were ever to be trustworthy, I had to show them I trusted them. Anyway, after the game, one of the other teenagers gave me a strong talking to, about giving this person my valuables, he would take off with them in a flash, they told me. He didn't.

Any way he was only around for a few weeks and then he took off, once he was released from prison.

I assumed, that when I hadn't heard of or seen him for several years, that he must have been imprisoned in the adult system or worse had overdosed on a cocktail of pills.

A number of years later, a young man turned up at volleyball one night looking for me. It was him, he had not been in prison, nor had he overdosed, but had been in Queensland working. During his time in Queensland, he had become a Christian. He now hoped to get into a youth work course, so that he could help kids like himself.

He then disappeared again and I hadn't thought about him much over the years. One morning when I was at the Moreland Church, someone in the congregation said a young couple with two children were outside and asking for help. I told them to bring them in as we were having morning tea. I don't know who was more shocked when they walked in, him or I. You see this was the young man I had met years before, now with a family. They lived in the area for a time, and I helped them as best I could. They then moved to the country. We lost touch again. Then a few years later, he had tracked me down (I was now working for Baptcare) and again he asked for help. Again, I did what I could. We have lost touch again and I really don't know how his story ends, and I half expect him to walk back into my life again at some point.

What I do know, is that, I had written him off, like the owner of the vineyard in Jesus' parable about the barren fig tree, cut him off as never being able to bear fruit. God on the other hand had other plans. God, it seemed to me revealed Godself to be the God of second chances, the one who ensures that which is not bearing fruit, gets another chance, the one who provides the strength, nurture and guidance to turn their life around and bear fruit.

This past week our Persian friends have celebrated NowRuz – Persian New Year, or literally a New Day. A new day in which we get a new chance to live life to its fullest, a new chance to bear fruit of joy, peace, forgiveness and care.

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In this story from Luke's gospel today, there are two significant learnings. First, we have the age old and universal question. Why do good people suffer? Some people had come to him and told him about a recent incident in which a number of Galileans had been killed by Pilate in the temple. A terrible tragedy, we would call it a war crime today and we don't have to look far at the moment to find similar incidents. Jesus asks them if they thought they suffered because they were more sinful than others, which was the prevailing wisdom of the day. He then puts them right, by referring to another incident (a tragic accident) which resulted in many innocent people being killed. Jesus' response to both incidents was clear – do not blame people for their suffering, people do not suffer in this way based on their sinfulness. Good people suffer just as much as bad people. Jesus absolutely rejects the idea that anyone who suffers some sort of calamity, is to be regarded as more guilty than others, more guilty than ourselves. We should not blame victims. Instead, one should focus on how they and we are going to live from now.

The second learning from Jesus comes in the form of a parable.

It is here that Jesus reveals God to be anything but vengeful and nasty. It was normal practice to plant fig trees in vineyards. Fig trees are meant to mature in three years and begin to bear fruit. Remaining barren is a problem for the owner of the vineyard. Why? Because it is taking up space and exhausting the soil without providing any return. The gardener, however, believes that this situation can be turned around given some extra time and greater care - in short given a second chance, this tree might yet bear fruit.

Clearly the owner is a businessman who expects to make a profit, if something doesn't earn its keep, then it must go. Isn't that the thinking Jesus is countering, the thinking that says, these people didn't make the grade, hence their demise or suffering.

The fig tree, is well, it is us. Individuals, churches, nations who haven't always made the grade, we who haven't always born fruit. We who need a second chance and the right sort of care so that we might realise our full potential and produce fruit of peace, of unity and of love.

And the gardener, that gardener is God. God, who is not vengeful and judgemental, but rather who makes a plea on our behalf, to spare us for a little longer, to see if in the right conditions we might bear fruit. God who is patient, who is our nurturer and wants to care for each and every one of us so that we might be who we are truly called to be. God, who is the God of second chances.

We are called to be like the gardener as well. We are called to be like God and to reveal God's kingdom to the world and to do so we must also be people of second chances. We must be prepared to plead the case for another, to give them another chance. We must also be the ones who are prepared to go the extra mile with that person. We must be prepared to provide the extra nurture and care, the 'fertiliser' so to speak, so that another might begin to bear fruit of righteousness, justice, mercy and love.

So, saints of Footscray, let's take a chance and go out and give all those we meet a second chance, as God already has. If my young offender friend taught me anything, change is always possible. Amen.