

*No Job Too Small*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Texts:**  
Luke 13:1-9  
Isaiah 55:1-9

**March 7, 2010**  
**Lent 3**



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### Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. 6Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 7let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. 9For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

### 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. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or 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? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” 6Then 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. 7So 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?’ 8He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone

for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”



Of all the pieces of wisdom which I learned from my father, perhaps the one that serves me the best in my pastoral ministry is this: *There is no job too small.*

My dad was always deeply involved in the life of our church – in nearly every aspect of what held that congregation and its building together. And that meant that he would volunteer to do anything that was needed. And I mean anything ...

Entertainer. Do you recall my bunny ears on Easter or my golden halo on Christmas Eve? Those are nothing compared to my dad at the Valentine’s Day dinner at my home church one year. His act included a sentimental love speech during which he confessed his deep and abiding love for the woman of his dreams, a woman who he had known for 30 years, a woman who he cared for so much that it was truly beyond words, the woman who meant more to him than anything or anyone else in the entire world. As the audience waited with baited breath for him to end his words of love and admiration by naming my mother, Grace ... he took a deep breath, turned to Mrs. Smith on the other side of the room and said – “RUTH, come on up here ...”! My dad the comedian.

Dishwasher. After every covered dish supper that I can remember, I would find my dad and some of the other men in the kitchen receiving the dirty dishes through the return window and standing at the sinks scrubbing and drying silverware and plates and cups and saucers. A friend was with me one night and she volunteered to help dry as a part of this well-oiled assembly line. Unfortunately, she had not learned the rules of dishwashing etiquette which my dad had picked up in the Navy during his WWII days. The cardinal rule went something like this: “If you are drying and find a dish that might not be quite clean, you *do not*

make a fuss about it, you simply slip it back into the dishwasher to be re-washed and move on to the next dish. No fuss; no complaining.” We all knew the rule; my friend didn’t. She went to dry a plate which still had some dirt on it so she stopped my dad and said, “Mr. Mac. Look. You missed a spot. This is still dirty.” A hush filled the kitchen. Those of who knew the rules and had learned the code of etiquette even as young children stopped and stared in disbelief. My dad slowly and patiently explained his WWII “Navy Dish-Washing” rule to my young friend – who then carefully slipped the plate back into the sudsy water and never forgot it again.

Dad could be Sunday School teacher. As I entered my teenage years, he took over the Youth Group and our Sunday School class. I still remember him putting the cassette tape recorder on the table, pushing the record button, and then having us read and enact a Bible story in a humorous and, most importantly, in a memorable way. Some of the stories which we re-enacted and replayed to laugh at as a tool for learning I still remember so very clearly. Noah’s Ark – much like the Bill Cosby standup routine. Daniel in the Lion’s Den. Joseph and his Coat of Many Colors. And the most memorable – Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednigo in the Fiery Furnace. I remember my cousins and I acting the parts with goofy voices – “Hi. I’m Shadrach.” “I’m Meshach.” “And I’m Abednigo.” “Oh, oh, oh ... it’s getting hot I here.” “Ouch. My toes ...” I bet I still have the tape lying around somewhere.

And as if learning the Bible stories weren’t enough, Dad taught me that there was truly *no job* too small for a faithful church member to do.

Plumber. One year as I was a young adult, the church furnace stopped working in the dead of winter. Dad discovered that there was a leak inside the brick-lined chamber of the old hot water furnace. The church would have to raise funds to replace the heater but in the meantime something had to be done to temporarily repair the problem. Dad called on my brother and me to help. With confidence and faith – and a bit of pretending that he

knew what he was doing – my dad had my brother literally crawl inside the furnace and patch the leaking holes with concrete patch. Inside the furnace. Realize what I’m saying. Inside. I still remember seeing my brother sitting in there cross-legged and squished into a ball spreading patch onto cracked bricks. Shadrach, Meshach, or Abednego?

There is nothing too small for any one of us to do to advance the reign of God in this world. Nothing too small for a member of God’s family to undertake as we attempt to serve God in all that we do.

During his 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus searched the heart of God, searched his own heart, struggled with meaning and temptation. He asked God to show him what he was to do in this world and how he could be an instrument of God’s expression to the world in which he – and we – lived. He must have asked God questions similar to the questions we ask even today. “God, how am I to live so as to be faithful to you? How am I to live in order to show the world your ways.” It’s not an easy search. This life as a faithful child of God is not an easy life. Jesus knew that. He came out of the wilderness, though, convicted and determined. He “set his face” toward Jerusalem, Luke tells us, toward the center of the religious world in which he lived. He knew that he had to challenge the spiritual status quo and he set his face – his life – to do just that. He was determined to live the life that God had called him to live. And nothing was going to get in his way. Jesus knew that there was no job too big or too small for a faithful child of God.

“When we consider creativity we are considering the most elemental and innermost and deeply spiritual aspect of our beings,” writes theologian Matthew Fox in *Creativity: Where the Divine and Human Meet*, “Imagination brings about not just intimacy but a big intimacy, a sense of union with the cosmos, a sense of belonging and being at home, of our knowing we have not only a right to be here *but a task to do as well while we are here.*” [emphasis added]

Jesus discovered that he had a task to do while he was here. In John's Gospel, Jesus says "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of [God] who sent me." (John 6:38) And he did it to the best of his ability. So also do you and I have a task to do while we are here. If as Matthew Fox says, imagination brings big intimacy, and we are looking for intimacy with God, then we have to faithfully imagine what it is that God has in mind for us. We have to imagine what it is that God would have us be and do.

It's not as if it's not there. God imagines something for each of us – we know that. We know that God's creativity in our lives is active and intense and encompassing. The trouble is on the receiving end where we are not open to what that God-imagination is for us here where the rubber-hits-the-road. It's not God that has slipped-up on the job. It's us. We're not being creative enough.

Matthew Fox continues: "Creativity, when all is said and done, may be the best thing our species has going for it. It is also the most dangerous." It's dangerous, I think, because it requires us to explore and reach beyond where we currently are. It's dangerous because it just might require us to do things that we consider beneath us or below us or "not my job."

So when I think of it that way, I go back to my dad as my model. There is no job too small. Whether it be foolishness at a church supper or washing the dishes or teaching the children or climbing into the furnace. Delivering a meal to an elderly member; praying with a child when she skins her knee; touching the person in the pew next to you; embracing a homeless person on the street. There is no job too small in God's world, no job that we are allowed to reject if we are to be faithful, believing followers of Jesus.

Are you willing to deliver flowers to a shut in as well as change a light bulb in the ladies room? Are you willing to stuff envelopes in the Church Office as well as teach an adult Bible study? Are you willing to help serve communion as well as rake leaves in the

church yard? Are you willing to not only worship on Sunday morning but also to serve God the rest of the week while you're not here in this building? It's what Alice Walker says on our parking lot sign out there: "Anyone can observe the Sabbath, but surely, making it holy takes the rest of the week."

There is no job too big or too small for us as Christians.

Jesus' parable of the fruitless fig tree that Luke recounts for us is a call to repentance. Immediately preceding this parable in Luke's Gospel is an image of judgment – God can be like the judge who throws you in prison for the crimes which you have committed. He follows, though, with this call to repentance and then a parable telling us of God's patience which reaches far beyond reasonable expectations.

Renowned preacher and theologian Fred Craddock says that in this piece of Luke's Gospel, the reader is led down a path. "God is the judge of our behavior and yet God offers to all of us opportunity for repentance; attending to one's relation to God is a matter of most urgent business now and yet God is patient with a fig tree that may yet bear fruit."

The owner of the vineyard says to the gardener, "This fig tree hasn't produced any fruit during the past three years. Let's cut it down and be done with it." The gardener convinces the vineyard owner that it should be left alone for one more year. "If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

The parable like any good parable shifts our focus away from the expected. Three years for a tree to bear fruit seems like a reasonable time, we think. That's an enormous amount of patience, isn't it? Isn't the owner justified in cutting down the tree? It's not a brutal judgment; it's reasonable and it's good stewardship. But Jesus shifts us, jolts us away from the anticipated. And we're left dangling with the unfinished story. My guess, if I had to complete the story, is that the gardener will plead the case for yet another year even if the tree produces no

fruit in its extra year. My mind leads me to understand – or hope, I suppose – that God is ever patient with me and my fruitless years no matter how many there might be.

The parable, on the one hand, does not let anyone off the hook, yet on the other hand it does not condemn anyone prematurely. You must bear fruit, yet if you don't you are not condemned to destruction, there is still a second chance. This is Jesus' promise of possibility, not a promise of outcome. All is possible in your life. All is not guaranteed.

Where is your life bearing fruit? What are you holding back that you sense God is asking of you? And what needs to be done so that you can respond? What remains to be done before you are ready to truly grow into the life to which God calls you? Those are questions which I don't have answers for – for you anyway. Those are questions that you must be asking yourself now and tomorrow and the days that follow. This 40 day wilderness through Lent is a good time to be asking the questions and to be listening for the answers.

Ask those questions of yourself: Where is my life bearing fruit? What am I holding back that I know God is asking of me? And what needs to be done so that I can respond? What remains to be done before I am finally ready to grow into the life to which God calls me?

One preacher wrote about this parable in an article in *Theology Today*: "If Christians are able to recognize that forgiveness is a way of life rather than a simple word to assuage guilt, then we will be on our way to embodying the wholeness of the gospel through mastering the craft of forgiveness." Another wrote: "Being freely forgiven, we practice forgiveness. Being unconditionally accepted, we practice unconditional acceptance, in stark contrast to the "trashing" we had been doing. Being so lovingly tended and cared for, we love and care for others, even and especially those we have previously condemned."

Being a follower of Jesus is about living a life, isn't it? It's not about easy answers or good behavior or simply asking for forgiveness. It's not simply about giving away money and doing good works to assuage our guilt. It's not about simply worshipping God on a Sunday morning when we worship a host of other lesser gods on Monday morning. It's not about feeling helpless because we think God has a plan in motion into which we have no input.

It's about living a life that knows no boundaries. It's about living a life which knows that there is no job too small for a faithful follower of the one who has promised not only the fig tree but us a second and third and fourth chance – who has promised 7 times 70 chances.

Jesus, who promises us possibility, not outcome, calls us to imagine differently what that life might be. Just as he reminds us that he was here "not to do my own will, but the will of [God] who sent me" he also reminds us that we are here to do the will of that very same God. We have a task. We have to imagine what it is that God imagines for us in this world. That imagining, Matthew Fox tells us, "brings about ... a big intimacy, a sense of union with the cosmos, a sense of belonging and being at home, of our knowing we have not only a right to be here *but a task to do as well while we are here.*" Jesus discovered that he had a task to do while he was here. Let us imagine and grow into our task as well.

Amen.