

## **Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent 2010**

This paraphrased article appeared in the Christian Century, March 4, 1998.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *“When I was a hospital chaplain, the calls I dreaded most ...came from the pediatric floor.... One day I received a call to... sit with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was in surgery. Earlier in the week, the girl had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she could no longer see. At the hospital, a CAT scan confirmed that a large tumor was pressing on the girl’s optic nerve, and she was scheduled for surgery.*

*“On the day of the operation, I found her mother sitting ...in the waiting room beside an ashtray full of cigarette butts. She smelled as if she had puffed every one of them.... She was staring at a patch of carpet in front of her, with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look that warned me to move slowly. I sat down beside her. She came to, and after some small talk she told me just how awful it was. She even told me why it had happened.*

*"It’s my punishment," she said, "for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn’t get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick." Then she started crying so hard that what she said next came out like a siren: "Now I’m supposed to stop, but I can’t stop. I’m going to kill my own child!"*

*“This was hard for me to hear.... "I don’t believe in a God like that," I said. "The God I know wouldn’t do something like that." The only problem with my response was that it messed with the mother’s worldview at the... moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one. I may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter’s brain tumor, but at the moment she could not: If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to be the reason. At least that way she could get a grip on the catastrophe.*

*“...Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect in hopes that we can stop causing it. What this tells us is that we are less interested in truth than consequences. What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives.*

*“Luke does not divulge the motive of those who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices. The implication is that those who died deserved what they got.... "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"*

*“It is a tempting equation that solves a lot of problems. (1) It answers the riddle of why bad things happen to good people: they don't. Bad things only happen to bad people. (2) It punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone. (3) It gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction....*

*“It is a tempting equation, but Jesus won't go there. "No," he tells the crowd, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.... Jesus says, there is no connection between the suffering and the sin. Whew. But unless you repent, you are going to lose some blood too. Oh.*

*“There is no sense spending too much time trying to decipher this piece of the good news. As far as I can tell, it is meant not to aid reason but to disarm it. In an intervention aimed below his listeners' heads, Jesus touches the panic they have inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them....*

*“While Jesus does not honor their illusion that they can protect themselves in this way, he does seem to honor the vulnerability that their fright has opened up in them. It is not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark -- not if it makes them turn toward the light.*

*“It is that turning he wants for them, which is why he tweaks their fear. Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.*

*“Depending on what you want from God, this may not sound like good news. I doubt that it would have sounded like good news to the mother in the waiting room. But for those of us who*

*have discovered that we cannot make life safe nor God tame, it is gospel enough. What we can do is turn our faces to the light. That way, whatever befalls us, we will fall the right way.”*

Just as a period of grace is given to the fig tree in the parable, so Jesus summons to repentance in this the 'last hour'. Originally the parable was aimed at Jesus' contemporaries. But later Luke applies it wider to include all disciples faced with the prospect of a sudden end of life. In this context the barren fig tree becomes a symbol of the disciple whose life is marked by unproductivity. Why should such a person, having been given life continue to use up resources so unproductively? If a person bears no fruit that person should be ready to face the fate of the barren fig tree. Luke's frequent reminder, "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it" lurks in the shade of the telling of this parable of the fig tree.