



Rev Chris Taylor - 3-24-19

God's Ways, Our Ways

The big news this past week was Robert Mueller finally submitting his report to the Attorney General. I'm not sure how this is all going to play out, but it is pretty clear that this is the end of one phase in this ongoing drama. We've been waiting so long for this report, and now it's here. Now the focus shifts to Capitol Hill and its response.

I've found myself wondering from time to time what this experience has been like for the President. When you think about it, the pressure has got to be extraordinary. You and I can break into a cold sweat at the thought of an IRS audit. Can you imagine what it would be like to have a former Director of the FBI and a hand-picked team of the best investigators given unlimited resources and all the time they need to look into every nook and cranny of your life? That, I think, would make even the best of us uncomfortable.

Who wouldn't get nervous? You don't have to be hiding some dark secret. I think just about anyone would get anxious because deep down every one of us knows that we are less than perfect; every one of us knows we've made mistakes along the way. It comes with being human. It is what the Apostle Paul was talking about when he said, Romans 3:23, that all of us have sinned, and that all fall short of the glory of God.

I've been reading Isabel Wilkerson's powerful account of the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*¹. Between 1915 and 1970, about six million African Americans left the south to move north or out west. At the beginning of the migration, ninety percent of the black population lived in the south. By the end of it, that number had dropped to fifty three percent. Better paying jobs was a part of it, but the oppression of Jim Crow was the great driver. Reading *The Warmth of Other Suns* will break your heart as it offers one account after another of the persecution and abuse that came with the written and unwritten rules of Jim Crow.

At one point, Wilkerson shares the story of Eddie Earvin. Eddie grew up in the Mississippi Delta during the forties and fifties. He was black, and learned fear early on. One day when he was still very little he was walking past a white people's church. When the kids in the church saw him they came running out. They threw rocks and bricks at him, and called him the vilest names they could imagine. Later, he asked his grandparents, "What kind of god they got up inside that church?"

You can't blame him for wondering. Where were the adults that day? Where were the Christian men and women who should have come streaming out of that church and put a quick end to the abuse?

Eddie was a day picker at a plantation. He started picking when he was five, and by the time he was six he was chopping weeds off the cotton. When he was seven or eight, he heard about a boy named Charles Parker who was skinned alive for opening a door for a white woman and speaking to her in a way she didn't like. The whole community was talking about it.

Where were the adults that day? Where the Christian men and women who should have come streaming out of their churches to put an end to the brutality?

Eddie never forgot what happened to Charles Parker. In addition to picking cotton, Eddie also cut spinach. He had to crawl on his knees to do it because spinach is so low to the ground. He got ten cents for a fifty pound basket of spinach. He could pick only two or three baskets a day because spinach is so light – twenty or thirty cents for a full day of back-breaking work in the humid, cloying heat of the Mississippi Delta.

One day when he was cutting, he sliced into his finger. He was afraid to leave the field; afraid of what might happen to him if he did. He worked two more days and on the third finally decided to walk the six miles into town to see the doctor. As he was making his way back, his boss drove by, saw him and jumped out of his truck.

"Don't you know you don't go nowhere unless I tell you to?" he said. He pulled a Winchester out of the truck. "Maybe I ought to kill you right now." He put the rifle to Eddie's head. "You don't go nowhere unless I tell you to go." Eddie was just seventeen years old.

Where, you wonder, were all the Christians when this stuff was going on?

And, of course, we already know the answer. Like us, they were in their churches on Sunday morning. Here's the thing: it is easy for us to sit back and condemn those Christians for what was going on – for not doing more to stop it – but the truth is I don't think they were all that different from you or me. I'm pretty sure there were a lot of good and caring people in those churches – people who believed in God; people who wanted to do what was right and loving. But maybe they just didn't know how to make a difference. Maybe the scope and pervasiveness of the evil was just overwhelming for them, paralyzing, not unlike some of the issues that face us today.

Neal Young can offer his plaintive cry against the racial injustices of the south in his song "Southern Man," but I think Lynyrd Skynyrd got it about right in their response; the song "Sweet Home Alabama. "In Birmingham they love the Gov'nor [they were talking about the openly racist Governor, George Wallace]...; Now we all did what we could do; Now Watergate does not bother me; Does your conscience bother you..."

The point is, we've all got our stuff; north, south, east, mid-west and west – every region has its issues that are every bit as real as what the south was facing a generation ago. What are we doing about them? If we condemn southern Christians for not doing more, we are condemning ourselves, as well.

That's what Jesus' parable of the fig tree here in our text is all about. That fig tree wasn't being judged for something it did. It's what it didn't do that angered the owner. The judgment here in this text is against an apathy and indifference; it is on people who profess the faith but fail to produce the expected fruit of justice and mercy, kindness and love.

Jesus is clear: there is going to be a day of judgment. Like the gardener with his fig tree, he has tended and cared for us and fertilized the very soil of our lives with his own blood. He has given us the best possible chance to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

His sense of urgency is real. People sometimes get all caught up in debating whether the judgment is a thousand years from now or ten thousand, but the truth is it doesn't matter. What matters is that when we die our next waking moment is going to be in the presence of the Lord, and at that point, what we've done or haven't done in this life is written in stone. There is no going back, no changing it.

For us, the Day of Judgment in other words, is as near as that moment when we breathe our final breath.

It all makes me very grateful to be part of a church that has a long history of making a difference. The CHIPS program; the suicide hotline; All of Us Care; the Pediatric Palliative Care Coalition; Backpacks for Kids; mission trips to Guatemala and Haiti; the support of local food banks; the support of so many ministries in the community and in the world; Harvest Fair and the countless hours that our volunteers pour into that – offering quality goods at affordable prices and raising still more money for mission. Mission is one of the five things this church values most. Giving ourselves away is written into the DNA of our congregation.

History has shown us that there is nothing God can't do with a band of faithful Christians. Nothing God can't accomplish. Nothing God can't overcome. All it takes is ordinary people like us willing to take a stand; willing to stand up for justice; willing to stand up for the poor and the oppressed; willing to wrap our arms around those in need; willing to offer ourselves in love to further the purposes of God's glorious Kingdom.

That's what bearing fruit is all about. And people, the good news this morning is that is never too late to start.

ⁱ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, (Vintage Books, New York, 2010)

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-221