

Extreme Couponing

a sermon on Luke 13:1-9 and Isaiah 55:1-3

by Nancy Raca, February 28, 2016, Covenant United Methodist Church

Do you clip coupons? Why? What's the best coupon deal you ever got? \$200 worth of groceries for \$5! Or even something as simple as three jars of spaghetti sauce for the price of one!

Clipping coupons, and its somewhat obsessive cousin, extreme couponing, is about getting something for less, or even for nothing. Lots of something, for **free!**

Shopping with coupons is like buying without money! And that certainly sounds tempting, doesn't it? This idea appealed even to the ancient Israelites. Listen to what Isaiah offered:

Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!
Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!

Now I doubt Isaiah is suggesting that the exiled Israelites scan the *Babylonian Times* for Buy One-Get One offers. Rather, Isaiah is inviting his hearers to "the richest of feasts" – a meal that comes "at no cost."

Doesn't that sound great? Well, good news! That is the meal that *you*, are invited to!

The banquet of spiritual food and living water that God lays out for us is *free*. God's grace is free and available to all. It doesn't take money, or good deeds, or right behavior, to come to the table.

But does that mean there aren't costs? Does that mean we don't pay any price to accept God's gifts to us? No. God's gifts are *free*, but they're not *cheap*.

In this time of year, the season of Lent, we reflect on the price paid by the world's #1 Redeemer: Jesus Christ. We prepare ourselves to be worthy of the redemption that comes not with a 50% off coupon but with the life and death of God's son, Jesus. In this season, we see that in fact there is no such thing as a free lunch. When a business offers a discount so that you can get a great deal – on a new mattress or a foot-long sub or whatever – someone, somewhere is making a sacrifice. *Someone* is paying the price.

On Good Friday, Jesus pays the highest price possible to give us the greatest deal ever – a new relationship with God, eternal life, forgiveness, grace, *100% off* all our sins!

God, through Jesus, offers us this incredible deal. An *exclusive* deal – a deal that we can find nowhere else. This deal is free, but it's not cheap.

Let's take a look at the parable today from the Gospel of Luke: A man has a vineyard, and in this vineyard is a fig tree. Unfortunately, this fig tree is not producing any figs. He's given it a chance – three years or probably more – but still no figs. It seems to the vineyard owner that this tree is taking up space that could be better used for something else. Fig trees take up a lot of nutrients from the soil and therefore deprive surrounding plants of nourishment they need. So, it looks like the tree has to go.

But wait! The gardener implores the owner to give the tree another year. The gardener feels that if he can give the tree some extra attention and some fertilizer then maybe it will produce some figs next year. If it doesn't, he says, *then* the owner can cut the tree down.

Our passage doesn't specifically say so, but we can imagine that the owner agrees to give the tree another chance.

So what will happen to the tree in the next year? Keep in mind that the "sin" of the tree is not that it is doing something bad, but that it is doing *nothing*. It is just taking up space, not bearing fruit. The challenge for the tree is to change, to do something, to bear fruit.

And that is the challenge that we face, as well. In Lent, God reminds us that we, as imperfect humans, are the fig tree, barren and needy. Alone, we can't produce the fruit we're meant to bear. Alone, we take from others for our own benefit. We want to be all we are made to be, but we need some tending.

Jesus tells us to *change our hearts and lives*. We can do that by digging around the roots of our lives, pruning our dead branches, and feeding ourselves.

What does that mean? Well, it starts with repentance.

A lot of us don't really like this word: repent. It conjures up images of aggressive, unkempt people with huge signs on the street corner screaming about the end of the world. We've reduced it to meaning a one-time, complete moral turnaround resulting in a permanently re-engineered life. But repentance is an *ongoing* act. It's an act of surrender; an acknowledgement that we can't be who we are meant to be on our own. It's a plea for the gardener, Jesus, to help us into a new, fruitful life.

And what is fruitfulness? Pastor Rick Warren points out that the word "fruit," or some form of it, is used 55 times in the New Testament in a variety of ways. It refers to repentance, as well as to offering of money, Christ-like character, good deeds, and the conversion of non-believers. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control also come up in the list of fruits. Our fruit shows up in our relationship with God, our relationship with money, and our relationships with others.

This year, this Lent, like the fig tree, we have another chance to change our hearts and our lives. We have a chance to acknowledge our failings, surrender to God, and gradually heal from whatever is holding us back, so that we can bear fruit.

God's gifts to us are free, but they're not cheap. Because when we choose to bear fruit for God's kingdom, when we accept God's invitation to the banquet, we are giving something up. We are choosing *not* to go to a different table. We have to sit next to people we don't like. We get food that's not to our taste. But even so, we will *feast* like we have never feasted before, and we will never be hungry again.

So how long is this offer good for?

Our parable today seems to imply that the fig tree is the recipient of a limited-time offer. One more year. After that, says the gardener, the owner can cut the tree down.

But who's to say what can happen in a year? Maybe the tree will begin to bear fruit. Maybe it will produce more fruit than any other tree around! Or maybe it won't. Maybe it will still be struggling, and once again, the gardener will ask for a reprieve. And maybe once again the owner will give one.

So maybe this is a limited-time offer. Or maybe not. But either way, it seems to me that God wants us to be all we can be *starting today*. God doesn't want us to wait another year to start bearing fruit. In fact, God expects us to get going *now*.

Which reminds me of one more coupon. This coupon, which our daughter Carolyn made for her dad when she was in grade school, offers to help my husband Paul with his golf game and with his work. It has no expiration date. But in some sense the time for redeeming this coupon has passed. Carolyn is 18 and leaving for college in a few months. The opportunities for Paul to interact with Carolyn in this way, to go to the driving range or to put her on his lap and let her type on his computer are pretty much gone. So a coupon may have no expiration date, but there *is* a sense of urgency. Because in Paul's case, he waited to redeem these coupons, and now he regrets it.

God's grace has no expiration date. Year after year, Lent after Lent, Jesus offers us the ultimate in redemption. Freedom from sin, freedom from death, freedom from worry. 100% off! It's an outrageous offer, but it's the real deal.

God's grace has no expiration date. But it is urgent. God does not want you five years from now. God does not want you to look back and regret that you haven't lived differently. God wants you *now*.

So come to the table! Change your life and your heart! Repent, bear fruit, and enjoy the food that will fill you for the rest of your life. Come today!

Let us pray.