

## **“Fortune, Fate, or Fruit?”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
March 20, 2022 – Third Sunday in Lent  
Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”  
(William Sloane Coffin).

As we continue on our travels together on this third week of our Lenten journey, it is good for us to consider those who have traveled before us, that we might learn from the wisdom that others have gained on their travels through life. One such wise person, who gained much wisdom from many journeys, is Forrest Gump. As he stated, “My momma always said you can tell a lot about a person by their shoes. Where they’re going, where they’ve been. I’ve worn lots of shoes.” Indeed, Forrest wore many shoes on many journeys. Though as a child it didn’t seem like he was destined for many long journeys, at least on foot as he had to wear heavy braces on both legs just to move around upright, he broke free from his braces to run away from a gang of bullies and he just kept on running. He was able to run so fast, in fact, that he became a star player for his college football team. His journeys after college led him to serve in the army in Vietnam, where he became a decorated war hero; and then to becoming a ping-pong ace and champion; a shrimping boat captain and founder of a successful seafood company; a long-distance running icon as he ran back and forth across the country for two years; a loving spouse as he married and cared for his lifelong friend Jenny as she suffered from a terminal illness; and then a devoted parent as he raised their son Forrest, Jr. Forrest Gump, Sr. was indeed a well-traveled man who wore lots of different shoes and learned many different lessons.

All the while, he wondered about the meaning of his journeys and how they came to be. His momma told him that “Life was like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re gonna get,” believing that the course of our life journeys was randomly determined, that we all just kind of floated around, guided by fortune or luck.

Forrest’s army commander, later business partner and friend, Lieutenant Dan, had a different take on things, believing that fate guided us through life, and that

his fate was to fight and die as a soldier on the battlefield, as his father did, and his father's father did, and so on. And so when Lieutenant Dan was wounded by an explosive when ambushed in the jungle, and he was unable to move and get away from an attacking enemy, it seemed that he was just meeting his own fate, following the path of destiny. But Forrest Gump ruined all that. While under attack, he picked up and carried his commanding officer, and then other fellow soldiers, out of the battle and to a safe place. Through the heroic action of Forrest Gump, Lieutenant Dan survived and went on to live a full, rich life, learning, only after the passing of much time, that he was, after all, not robbed of his destiny to die on the battlefield.

At the end of the delightful 1994 film, Tom Hanks' character Forrest reflects upon the differing philosophies of his mother and a younger Lieutenant Dan, and wonders if life is indeed like a box of chocolates or if we are all guided by fate, saying, "I don't know if mama was right or if it's Lieutenant Dan. I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze. But I think maybe it's both. Maybe both is happening at the same time."

As we wear many different shoes ourselves and travel down many different paths throughout our lives, we may also wonder if we are guided by fate, happenstance, little of each, or something else. And when we do, we follow in the tradition of many wonderers and sages of our Christian religion and the tradition of Judaism out of which our own tradition came, who held a variety of differing viewpoints on these matters.

In today's New Testament reading from the Gospel of Luke, we read of Jesus addressing one of these viewpoints, which was held by many in his day, that when we experience in this life good things, it is only because we have been good, and if we experience bad things, it is only because we have been bad. Jesus challenges this notion by telling two stories, one of a despicable act of Roman governor Pilate killing a group of Galileans as they worshipped at the Temple and another of 18 people perishing as a tower collapsed by the pool of Siloam in Jerusalem, and questioning if the innocent people who suffered from these tragic events did so because God was punishing them in some way. He concludes that these who suffered did not do so because they were any worse than the rest of us. They did not earn their suffering by their bad deeds.

And yet, he also teaches that God does get involved in our lives. Jesus tells a parable of a fig tree that was planted but produced no figs. Though the tree had been taken care of for years and should have produced fruit, it did not. The owner of the field told the gardener who worked it to cut the tree down and to plant one in its place that would produce fruit. But the gardener pleaded with the owner to spare the fruitless tree, to let him try to work the soil around it and nourish it for just one more season, not giving up hope that it might become fruitful. The owner of the field in this parable is God, who, we are led to believe, doesn't act to have the tree chopped down, but instead acts in forbearance, allowing the tree to receive special attention that it might flourish and produce the fruit it was destined to produce.

The image of the tree in this parable, like images of trees and vineyards throughout his other parables and the writings of many sages of Israel before Jesus, represents Israel, which was planted by God and nourished by God, but so often failed to produce the fruit of faithfulness, justice, righteousness, peace, and love, that God intended for it to produce. This was the destiny of Israel, but the people of Israel often failed to live into that destiny. We believe that through Christ, we have been grafted into this tree and so share in this destiny, this calling, to produce fruit that will bless the world.

So often, like the people of Israel before us, we don't live up to our calling, and we act more like a fruitless fruit tree. Thanks be to God, we are not left to our fruitlessness, but God intervenes, giving us more of what we need to live into our destiny of producing fruit, identified by the Apostle Paul as "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Friends, when on your journey you pull a chocolate from the box of life that is not at all to your liking, is painful, or causes sorrow or grief, consider it fertilizer for your soul. For there is much in our lives that gets dumped around us and on us, like manure, that is messy and stinks. Sometimes the stuff gets dumped just randomly, other times by the doing of other people, and at times by our own doing. When manure gets dumped on your roots, instead of considering it a curse from heaven or offering a curse to heaven, find in it something that can help you to grow as God intends for you to grow and to produce fruit as God intends for

you to produce. May God bless us all with growth and may God bless the world with our good fruit. Amen.