

**First Presbyterian Church, Wausau**  
**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**  
**Of Towers and Trees – February 28, 2016**

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has been preparing his followers for the coming Reign of God. Even John the Baptist, covered in the dust of the wilderness, came out preaching a message of repentance and dunking the people into the waters of the Jordan River. He knew that God was about to do something. Something Big! And the people needed to repent – do some internal cleansing to get back on track. Then here Jesus comes, on the coattails of John – preaching, teaching, healing – continuing the message of God’s big news.

Leading up to our text this morning, all throughout the previous chapter in Luke’s gospel, Jesus had been teaching the people to prepare for the upcoming judgment. His stories and parables all focused on preparedness and getting his followers ready for the arrival of God’s Reign. Even though he has been telling them to watch for it, he doubts they will know it when it is smacking them right in the face. No matter how much he talked about it, the people didn’t seem to be getting it.

Case in point: in the midst of these teachings, some people stood up and said to Jesus, “Well how about what happened to those people from Galilee? They were slaughtered by Pilate’s men as they attempted to make their sacrifices in the Temple. What do you say about that, Jesus? Is that one of those signs you were talking about?” The speakers were probably trying to get Jesus to denounce the cruel injustice of Roman Empire. Enough of this talk of repentance – when will we rise up against our oppressors? If they wanted to get Jesus to make a political stand, it backfired. Instead of denouncing the atrocity, Jesus proclaimed, “Unless YOU repent, you all will perish. You need to be concerned about yourself and where you stand with God.”

Jesus knew that the people of his time had their own political agenda. There were uprisings and nationalistic enthusiasts who stood in opposition to the Roman oppression. There were political intrigues, rebellions, and plotting. Jesus knew that in the face of imperial Rome, these patriotic ambitions of the Jews would end in national suicide. This would be no David and Goliath story. The people had been expecting a political Messiah. But Jesus was not teaching about an earthly kingdom. The reign of God is spiritual in nature. The rebels needed to wake up to the reality of the situation and take stock of themselves or be obliterated by Rome. According to Jesus, they needed to repent of their own sin, lest they destroy the very people whom they wished to serve.

Aside from the political perspective, there is another way of looking at these verses. The people brought this concern Jesus because they wanted to know why the Galilean massacre happened. Why did this horrendous evil occur? Was it the punishment for some awful sin the Galileans had committed? The Jewish belief was that righteousness was rewarded and unrighteous was punished. Look at the story of Job in the Old Testament. Job was the embodiment of suffering – he lost everything including family, livelihood and health. Though he continually claimed his righteousness, his friends kept telling him, if you had not sinned, this would not have happened to you.

Jesus responded to the people by asking, “Do you think these massacred Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans? That their sins invited this slaughter by the Romans? And what about those 18 people who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Was their offense worse than all other people in the city Jerusalem?” No, he tells them. You’re missing the point. Things happen. To all people, regardless of one’s status of right or wrong living. Evil people will continue to harm and take advantage of others. Disasters and natural tragedies will continue to occur. Wars will be waged. Rulers will slaughter innocent people. Tornados and earthquakes will devastate populated areas. Diseases will spread.

Jesus is not ignoring the gravity or importance of these events or any type of tragedy. But these types of questions are off the point that Jesus has been trying to make. It’s an attempt to get Jesus off onto some tangent, a philosophical debate on the nature and cause of suffering. (No student has ever tried THAT before! Get the teacher off topic.) But Jesus isn’t about to take the bait. Instead he uses these two tragic situations as examples to emphasize his point. He says to the people, repent, for you too could be face-to-face with death at any given moment. So right now, at this time, not at some point in the vague future, you need to be ready. In essence he is saying, don’t worry so much about the sins you see around you – worry about the sin that is in your own heart. And repent, or you too may perish. Repentance isn’t the time for procrastination. Do it now. Or you may find that you’re just a little too late.

Then Jesus gives them an example, a parable about a fig tree in a vineyard. In this parable, the landowner had given ample time for the fig tree to mature, but it didn’t bear fruit. As it was an unproductive tree, he told his gardener to cut it down. A reasonable request. The gardener however pleaded on behalf of the tree for another year, giving it another chance to produce fruit. In fact in the parable the gardener even offers to nurture and care for it during that year.

Jesus’ audience would have gotten the message that Israel was the fig tree. Throughout their history the Israelites had been given the opportunity to hear God speak and to accept the

offer to be in covenant with God. Through Moses they received the law. Then came a long line of prophetic voices, calling the Israelites to repentance, right living, and caring for the weakest among them. And now, they have a chance to follow God in the person of Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of Luke's gospel, John the Baptist called the people to repent and told them "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." John the Baptist believed that with Jesus came the coming hour of destiny. Jesus was the final opportunity to follow God because after that, what more could God do? It would be impossible to send a more urgent appeal than the coming of God in human flesh. Get right with God, 'cause here God is!

So the question for us is, how does this parable of repentance apply to us? The fig tree's flaw was its uselessness, simply taking up space in the vineyard. The landowner wanted to cut down the fig tree because it wasn't doing what it was designed to do. It was just there, taking up room. Oh, perhaps it was pretty to look at, and it really wasn't hurting anyone, so why not just leave it be? The problem was it wasn't bearing figs. It was supposed to produce fruit and there was nothing. There is a meme on the internet that shows a picture of a blatant mistake that someone made – like putting a door on a bathroom stall that won't close because it hits the toilet or painting stripes on the road that go all curvy – and the caption says, "You had ONE job!" The tree in the vineyard had one job – to produce figs. It failed.

So what about us? While we each have numerous skills and abilities, as humans, our one job, according to Jesus, is to love God and love our neighbors. He calls that the greatest commandment. That is the fruit we bear in our lives. Do we bear fruit or do we just take up space in the pew? I think, when we come down to it, the ultimate question in anyone's life is "Am I making a difference in the world? Am I here for a reason?" Sometimes we get hung up on wanting to do big things. And maybe we rationalize, saying, well I can't do anything really important, I am just an average person. Of what use am I to God? Being useful doesn't mean having to do big things. Sometimes it's the littlest things that make the biggest differences in the world.

Pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner shared an incident that occurred in a state-run mental hospital. At the hospital, the mental patients who were considered to be truly hopeless cases were transferred to a back ward. The psychiatrists and other medical staff steered clear of this ward. They visited there only out of necessity and wrote off the patients as being unsalvageable. A women's group from a local church began to come to the hospital to visit all the patients as part of their compassionate service. No one told them that the patients in the

back ward where thought to be lost causes, so they visited them regularly. They brought flowers, homemade cookies, and a cheerful attitude. They offered prayer and extended mercy. Soon, some of these supposed "lost causes" began to respond, a few of them even becoming healthy enough to transfer to other wards. (Quoted in a sermon by Thomas Long, "Breaking and Entering")

Little things matter. Showing kindness, grace and compassion in our daily lives. It doesn't take much to make a difference. We are not just along for the ride. We are not here to simply take up space. We have one job to do.

The parable of the fig tree shows us the tension between God's judgment and God's grace. Jesus calls us to repentance now because the Reign of God is now. Yet there is still room for grace, a second chance. The gardener asks the landowner to give the fig tree another year, another chance to bear fruit before it's rooted out of the vineyard. But like the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate and the people crushed by the tower of Siloam – we don't know when the time will run out.

This passage fits in well with the Season of Lent because it smacks us in the face with our need for repentance. It's a reminder to us that we have a higher calling in our lives. Going through the motions won't cut it. Garrison Keillor has been quoted as saying, "You can become a Christian by going to church just about as easily as you can become an automobile by sleeping in a garage."

Like the fig tree, we have one job to do, to bear fruit in our lives. Let's do it.