

“Sooner Rather Than Later” – March 24, 2019 – Luke 13:1-9

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Just prior to today's lesson in Luke's gospel, Jesus had been teaching the people to prepare for the arrival of God's Reign. He described it as a time of judgment where people would be held accountable for how they lived their lives. Jesus had been preaching and telling stories and parables about what this time of God's reign would be like, and he had been telling them to keep their eyes open, to prepare. They needed to ready themselves by means of confession and repentance – they needed to get themselves right with God, so they would be ready for God's arrival.

Some people asked him about a local atrocity that had occurred in the Temple. Some Galileans were slaughtered by Pilate's men while they were making their sacrifices. In the midst of their religious worship, they were killed by the oppressive Roman regime, by people who saw them as nothing more than the animals that were used in the ritual. The speakers wanted to know what Jesus thought of that horrendous deed. More than likely they wanted to sidetrack Jesus from his focus on repentance, and instead, denounce the cruelty of the Roman oppressors. They were looking for a leader who would start a rebellion. But Jesus would not be deterred. He proclaimed, “Unless YOU repent, you too will perish.”

Jesus could appreciate the perspective of his fellow Jews, who were fatigued by their ongoing oppression by Rome. The people had been expecting and hoping for a political Messiah. But Jesus also knew that in the face of the Empire, the nationalist ambitions of his compatriots would end horribly. They would be crushed by the Romans. The reign of God that Jesus spoke about was not earthly in origin – it was not a physical overthrow of the earthly rulers. God's reign was spiritual in nature – an adjustment of attitude to one of care and concern for others.

Along with the political aspect of the speakers' question, they probably also wanted Jesus to address the horrific evil of the Galilean massacre in the Temple. Why did this happen? Was it a punishment for sin? The Jewish belief was that righteousness was rewarded and unrighteous was punished. What horrible thing had the Galileans done to be slaughtered in such a way?

Jesus responded to them, “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?” We often wonder the same thing. When we hear of atrocities in our own time, such as the slaughter of Muslim men, women, and children in New Zealand, who were gathered together in their mosque for worship. Or when we hear

of disasters like the horrific flooding in Nebraska. While most of us know that we live in a world where such natural disasters and human-caused carnages take place, and we don't normally attribute those as some punishment for sin. Yet, when the disaster hits closer to home, we often will cry out "why me?"

But Jesus clears up any misunderstanding. We live in a world where bad things happen. To any and all people, regardless of one's status of right or wrong living. Evil people will continue to make choices that cause harm to others. Natural disasters – fires, floods, tornados, draught – 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 into a philosophical debate on the nature and cause of suffering. Jesus takes these two tragedies 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 very moment, you need to be ready. Repent, or you too may perish. Repentance isn't the time for procrastination.

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. The gardener however pleaded on behalf of the tree for another year, giving it another chance to produce fruit.

The fig tree's flaw was its uselessness, it was 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 – bear figs. It was supposed to produce fruit, and there was nothing.

How does that relate to us? According to Jesus, our purpose 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 impact.

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 were 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.

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 confronts us with our need to continually examine our lives and repent of those things that are counter to God's will for us. It reminds us that the fruit of our faith is to show love for others.

Like the fig tree, we have a function, a purpose. According to Jesus, that purpose is to bear fruit in our lives by loving God and neighbor. Let's do it.