

3rd Sunday of Lent
Luke 13:1-9
March 6&7, 2010
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Last Sunday evening we had the first class in a series called “Where is God in Human Suffering?”, a series of classes being led by local Lutheran clergy. The topic of the first class was the book of Job. You may know the story of how Job loses almost everything. As Job suffers through these circumstances, Job’s friends suggest that Job suffered because he had done something wrong. During our discussion last Sunday the following question was raised: “Do you believe that people get what they deserve, in life as well as in the after-life?” I was struck by this question, because it is so characteristic of our human nature. We want people to get what they deserve. Take just a simple example: Have you ever been driving down the highway, when someone flies by you at 90 miles an hour, and you think to yourself “I hope they get a speeding ticket”?

The question of people getting what they deserve is implied at the start of today’s gospel reading. A group of Galileans was performing their sacrifices at the temple, only to be slaughtered by Pilate. Did this happen because they were worse sinners than other Galileans? Eighteen people were killed when a tower fell on top of them. Did this happen because they were worse sinners than other residents of Jerusalem? For the people gathered around Jesus, the answer would have been “yes”. It was common at the time that physical suffering was a consequence of sin.

Now consider this example: Hundreds of people were killed by an earthquake in Chile last week. Did this happen because they were worse sinners than other residents of South America? There are some people who might say “yes”. After all, that same conclusion was reached by one prominent televangelist after the earthquake in Haiti. I wish I could understand

this tendency of human beings to come to conclusions such as this. It seems there is something in our nature that connects sin and suffering.

This is not to say that our actions do not have consequences, because they do. If you get caught running a red light, you get a ticket. Or worse yet, if you run a red light, you might broadside another driver. If you kill someone, you go to jail. If you are unfaithful in a relationship, that relationship will be forever changed, probably for the worse. If your business cheats people out of their money, your business will not last long. I could give more examples, but you probably get the point. Our actions *do* have consequences, and these actions are all consequences of an undeniable reality – we are *all* sinners. We are *all* separated from God. There is no such thing as one person being a worse sinner than another. People do not suffer in proportion to their sinfulness. We are all equally sinful. The consequences of our sinful nature are all those things we say and think and do to hurt ourselves and one another. We are broken people, stuck in our sinful ways.

So Jesus posed a question to those who were with him, “Do you think that they were worse sinners than the others?” Jesus then answers his own question, something he does often. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” His answer is blunt and to the point, just like it appears on the cover of our bulletin this weekend, in big, black, bold lettering. “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Jesus is saying that if you do not turn your life around you will perish. Jesus confronts our sin head on.

Now this word *perish* is about more than physical death. After all, we are all going to die, whether we repent or not. To perish means to fall away from God, to face eternal *separation* from God, instead of eternal *life* with God. So if we do not repent we will be forever separated from God.

Now at this point in the story, I want to raise my hand and ask Jesus a question, “You just said that unless we repent we will perish. I have tried over and over again to turn my life around. I have tried to stop all my bad behaviors. I have tried to make myself right with God. But you know what? Every time I try to change I end up going back to my old ways. Just how do you suggest I make this repentance thing happen?”

After telling the crowd they must repent or perish, Jesus tells a parable, a parable that doesn’t necessarily clear everything up, but a parable that gives us hope. It is a parable that points to the great lengths to which God goes for us. There is a fig tree that is not bearing fruit. In fact for *three years* this fig tree has not been bearing any fruit. For three years the vineyard owner has been patiently checking the tree for fruit, but now his patience has run out. It is time to cut the fig tree down. It is *wasting* the soil!

The gardener, however, is more patient. He urges the owner to give the tree one more year. The gardener even offers to devote a little extra effort towards this fig tree. He will dig around it and put manure on it. In other words, he is going to fertilize it. Hopefully *that* will make it bear some fruit. Maybe it just needs some fertilizer. Give it another chance. Wait for one more year, and let the manure do its work.

Now I know a little bit about farming, and I also know some things about gardening, but I do not know a single thing about growing fig trees. I have never even seen a fig tree. However, I did read something this week about fig trees that sheds a little light on this story. Apparently fig trees require very little special care. They are able to take in nutrients from the soil on their own. It would be *very* unusual for a gardener to spread manure around a fig tree to fertilize it. So the gardener is making a special effort to get this fig tree to bear fruit. Not only is he giving it another chance, but he is also going to great lengths to help this tree.

The parable of the fig tree points to a God who is *patient* with us. God has every right to cut us all down, because we are not bearing fruit. In fact, we are wasting the soil. It's about time for us to turn our lives around! This parable gives us hope, because God is like the patient gardener who is willing to give the tree more time. Not only is God patient, but God is also willing to take special measures so that we will bear fruit. God goes to great lengths to save us, not destroy us. God is giving us what we do not deserve – another chance.

This parable reminds us that we cannot turn our lives around on our own. We need some help. Richard Jensen, a Lutheran preacher and teacher, has this to say about repentance:

“Repentance is not a fruit problem; *it is a root problem*. It is the root of who we are that is a problem in God's eyes. So repentance cannot be composed of 'I can' statements. 'I have sinned God. I am sorry God. *I can do better.*' Repentance, rather, must be composed of 'I can't' statements. 'I have sinned, God. I am sorry. God, I've tried and tried and tried but I just don't produce good fruit. *I can't seem to do better.* I need your Vinedresser to work on the roots of my life. Give me a new life, God. Give me your life. I can't. You can.” (Richard Jensen, *Preaching Luke's Gospel*)

The parable of the fig tree reminds us that God goes to great lengths to bring us back to him. When we look upon the cross we are reminded of the lengths to which God went to bring us back to him. God came into our world in human form, so that we might know who God is, and that we might turn back to him. But what did we do? We still turned away. We even put him to death on a cross. But death was not the final answer, and Christ rose again. God went to great lengths and still goes to great lengths to bring us back to him. God keeps on offering us the gift of his grace again and again, even though we do not deserve it. But we don't accept the gift.

Repentance is about coming to terms with our sinful existence, and recognizing that we cannot change on our own. Jesus confronts us with the reality of our sinful nature. We are unworthy. We say, “God, I've tried and tried and tried but I just don't produce good fruit.” We confessed our sin today in worship. I invite you to take out your bulletins, and join me in saying

those words together again. *We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and are not worthy to be called your children. Have mercy on us and turn us from our sinful ways. Bring us back to you as those who once were dead but now have life, through our Savior Jesus Christ.*

Amen.

When we are aware of our sin, we open ourselves to change. We recognize we cannot change on our own. It is only by God's grace that we are able to change. Without the help that God freely gives we are like that fig tree, wasting the soil, not bearing any fruit. But when we accept God's gift of grace we are changed, and we bear fruit, the fruit of repentance. Our lives begin to reflect the love of the one who first loved us. Repentance is about a whole new way of thinking and living. We cannot get there on our own. We need help – lots of help.

So the message from Jesus is both blunt and hopeful. Unless you repent you will perish. Unless you repent you are going to get what you deserve. But God goes to great lengths to offer us what we do not deserve. Accept the gift. Let God change your heart.

Amen