

Lent III A
Kimberly Reinholz
Grace and Holy Trinity
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Luke 13:1-9

Today's Gospel reading can be confusing, and like Bo said last week it is tempting to take a piece of scripture which is confusing and skip over it and get to something that is easier to understand, but I am going to try to make this a little less confusing.

First there three parts to this lesson: the first is the question of the guilt or innocence of the Galileans whom Pilate has had killed. (The same Pilate who plays such a pivotal role in Jesus' trial and execution on Good Friday.) The second is Jesus response to the question and the third is the parable of the fruitless fig tree.

In the first part of the gospel some of those gathered to hear Jesus speak ask a question about the guilt or innocence of the Galileans whom Pilate has executed, whose blood has been mixed with their sacrifices. We do not know the charges which were brought against the Galileans, we don't know the details of their arrest, arraignment, trials or executions, but based upon Jesus' response it is logical to assume that the question coming from the crowd is were they guilty or were their parents or other relatives guilty of a crime? If they were charged by Pilate it would make sense that the question comes from a similar place as the question of "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?", which is found later in Luke's Gospel. The common people, the pharisees, the sadducees and the Romans are all trying to suss out if Jesus is a revolutionary, and if he is, what kind of a threat is he to the status quo. It would make sense to ask this potentially challenging Galilean how he might feel about the execution of other possibly anti-Roman Galileans then, wouldn't it?

However, as usual, Jesus doesn't respond as the people in the crowd expect him to- or as we might expect him to. He doesn't lament the loss of his fellow Galileans or talk about their guilt or innocence at all- just like he doesn't dwell on the right or wrongness of the tax system, when he says pay unto caesar what belongs to caesar and give to God what is God's- Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them that they are asking the wrong question.

For Jesus, the lesson that he wants to impart is that death is not a punishment for sin. Contrary to the cultural belief at the time, death is not an edict given by God based upon an individual's guilt or innocence of an infraction of the Law. Jesus doesn't answer the question of if the Galileans were guilty or innocent, he responds to the question by saying their death is no more attributed to their sinfulness than the death of the people in Siloam who were crushed by the wall. Death is not the penalty for sinfulness neither for an individual's sins nor the sins of their ancestors.

Jesus tries to explain this time and time again to the crowds, his disciples, and us through parables and sermons. However, it seems that until the world knows the grace of God demonstrated through the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, the truly radical and gracious nature of God is lost. When we lose sight of this fact, that God doesn't sentence us to death for the

sins we have committed, we and all those who were the original witnesses to Jesus' teachings miss the essential message.

Even today Christians and non christians alike think, or pray, when faced with illness or death why did God do this to me? or what did they do to deserve this?

Christians should know better, we are people of the resurrection. Our truth is that Death is not the end. Death is not a punishment. Illness is not retribution for sin. Yes, our bodies are frail. Our physical existence is temporary. But illness and death no matter how devastating, no matter how unexpected, no matter how shocking is not the end, death is not the final judgement for sin.

Because Jesus defeated sin on the cross and death when he rose again from the grave, Christians have the benefit of this knowledge, and even with this knowledge when faced with terminal illness and death it is natural to wonder if it is retributive justice. But rest assured that it is not. God doesn't punish humanity's sins in this way. Those who heard Jesus in Jerusalem were not yet aware of this Good News, and he tried to illuminate them of what was to come through the parable and image of the fig tree.

A fig tree which appears to be dead. A fig tree which has been fruitless for three years, one which I wonder if it yielded fruit four years ago. A tree which the landowner wants to cut down and use the soil for a better use. A tree which the gardener asks if it might nurture and fertilize for one more season- offering it one more chance.

What if I am the fig tree? Or my husband, daughter, sister, of anyone else that I love? What if the landowner, who sees that in the recent past we (myself and those I most love) haven't been living into our lives as christians, if we haven't been loving our neighbor, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting with prisoners, haven't been respecting the dignity of every human being and spreading the good news of the Gospel in all that we say and do. Which I can pretty much say that I am guilty of 90% of the time. I am not a very fruitful fig tree if I look at how I spend most of my days.

What if is the Devil is the landowner? The one who sees that I am bearing little if any fruit and determines that I am a waste of space. And determines that I should be cut down and tells the gardener there is a better use for the land. After all the Devil played a very similar role in the trial of Job, and I imagine that Satan doesn't have much of a tendency to change.

Then who is the gardener? The one who advocates for one more chance. Even after three fruitless seasons, The gardener is God- incarnate as Jesus, eternally present as the Holy Spirit, and infinitely graceful. God always provides another chance for us to bear fruit. I imagine that this gracious gardener had this same approach after the first and the second fruitless year that he now proposes in the third.

What Jesus is teaching us in the gospel is that there is a drastic difference between how we see the world diametrically either this or that, life and death, guilt and innocence, right and wrong and how the world actually was created to be and how God sees the world. Life is eternal, death is not the end, sin is forgiven by repentance and God always gives another chance, another year to try to turn things around.

As individuals it is our Lenten intention to discern if our lives are producing the fruit desired of the Holy Spirit which according to Paul's letter to the Galatians, are: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So today I commend to to consider

these aspects of your personal spiritual journey- are you loving, joyful, peaceful, forgiving, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-aware? Could you use one more year to try to bear the fruits of the spirit? I know I can.

As a Christian community here at Grace and Holy Trinity, I believe we are well on our way to a fruitful yield. On this third Sunday of Lent as we reach the halfway point in this season of discernment and learning in the divine hope of true repentance. Let us consider the fruits of the past year as a community. We have discerned a strategic plan full of opportunity to bear good fruit and now Christ, the gardener, is churning the soil at our roots. We are being fertilized so that this place maybe the setting for an enriching spiritual journey for all who cross our threshold; this community can support and form the spiritual lives especially for children, youth, students and young adults; and this congregation may join with other communities in Richmond to break the cycle of poverty. We pray that through the power of the Holy Spirit the fruit we will bear in three years, thirteen years or thirty years will be pleasing to God.

Let us keep in mind as we continue on the Lenten journey during which we are charged to read and learn about difficult passage of Scripture like this one, that as individuals who are part of this community of believers, each day brings with it the opportunity to benefit from God's grace. A grace which promises that death is not punishment for sin and that although our bodies may die, our souls are heirs to eternal life. The devil may claim we are worthless, but God loves each and everyone of us and grants us the gift of one more season, one more opportunity to bear love, joy, peace, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

Amen