



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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3rd Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2016

“The Gracious Vinedresser”

(Luke 13:1-9)

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COLLECT: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

So what do we know about those Galileans who were killed at Pilate's command? All we really know is what Luke tells us here: some Jews who lived in Galilee made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They went to the temple, and as they were offering sacrifices, they were suddenly cut down, on orders from Pilate. Historians have no other account of this, but they tell us it was not an unusual sort of thing for Roman soldiers to kill a few Judeans now and then. And they tell us Pilate was well-capable of ordering such cruelty. They also tell us that Pilate anticipated trouble whenever there was a Jewish celebration in Jerusalem; the reason being there were always some religious zealots who were hoping to start a Jewish revolt against Roman occupation. So Pilate took precautions on those Jewish feast days, bringing in lots of extra Roman troops to keep the peace from the nearby garrison in Caesarea. Some have speculated maybe these Galileans who were slain were planning to ignite a rebellion.

In any event, Roman soldiers killed a number of Jews. It must have happened just days before because people seem eager to share the news with Jesus. He asks them, "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than the others because they suffered in this way?"

The notion that personal disaster is the direct result of personal sin . . . that notion was deeply rooted in the Jewish mindset. When Job lost everything, his friends assume he must have done something to deserve it. In Job 22, Eliphaz tells Job, "Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? That is why snares are all around you" (5-10). And in John 9, when Jesus and his disciples came across a man born blind, the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned,

this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Jesus shot down the assumption. He does it again in our text today. “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” That is, without genuine repentance and faith, no one is saved; all perish.

Pilate’s order to kill those Jews from Galilee was a man-made tragedy. It was a calculated order. Does the same lesson hold true in an accident, something more like a natural disaster or earth quake? Jesus brings it up. How about those 18 who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them: do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? Again, the answer is, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” If those eighteen were not more guilty, so why did they perish? Jesus doesn’t say. That belongs to the hidden mysteries of God. And we are not allowed to go sniffing around in those hidden mysteries of God with our speculations. All we need to know is that it is not our job to judge people who are suffering and say they probably had it coming. Rather, our job is to do the work of daily repentance.

Still today, we quietly make similar assumptions. Earth quakes, tsunami, Ebola, car accidents, cancer, economic ruin. The age old question is why did this tragedy happen? We like to keep things simpler for ourselves, and what could be more simple than to assume they must have earned it. When we do that, we speak where God has been silent. We go where angels fear to tread. We make conclusions as if we can read the mind of God.

Some have even argued that acts of charity toward people who are suffering interfere with God’s punishment! But remember, Jesus announced God’s favor on the poor, the maimed, the blind, the crippled. That in itself should have shattered any notions that our financial state, or physical state reflects our spiritual state. Sometimes wicked people prosper, and sometimes saints suffer. We’ve always known that, and that too should be enough to dispel the dogma that people get what they deserve. And remember, Jesus himself

suffered grievously. That too should bury the assumption that those who suffer more are worse sinners. “I tell you no” Jesus said, “but unless you repent, you will all perish.”

In the Clint Eastwood movie, “Unforgiven”, a retired gunslinger reluctantly takes on one last job with the help of a young wannabe gunslinger. The young fellow makes his first kill, assassinating a defenseless guy sitting in an outhouse. Later, when he considers he just took a man’s life, his conscience flairs up. Trying to justify himself he says, “Well, I guess he had it comin.” In a classic line, Eastwood’s character replies, “Kid, we’ve all got it comin.””

Theologically, that’s spot-on. “We’ve all got it comin’.” We basically say that every Sunday morning when we confess, “We justly deserve your present and eternal punishment.” So your obligation is not to speculate as to why you or anyone else is suffering. Your obligation is to live in true penitence and trust before God, and bear the fruit of repentance.

Next Jesus tells a little parable about a man who planted a fig tree in a vineyard. He plants it there to insure it receives the best care. Generally, it takes a long time for a fig tree to bear fruit. Finally the year arrives when it would be reasonable to expect fruit. He looks for it. With fig trees, the fruit grows underneath the leaves. You have to dig into the tree to find it. The man does, but doesn’t find any. The following year, he looks again. Still no fruit. He’s a patient man. He gives it another year. The third year he comes again looking for fruit. No fruit. He’s had it with this tree. It’s just taking up space, stealing moisture and minerals and sunlight from other plants that would bear fruit. “Cut it down” the owner says to the vinedresser.

The vinedresser is shaken. Somehow, this fig tree has become an object of his special interest. He begs for time. “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Gail and I planted a Korean Lilac at the corner of our house. After six or seven years, we still hadn’t seen or

smelled any stinkin' blooms. One fall Gail spoke an ultimatum over it. "Produce or perish! Your fragrance or your life!" Apparently lilacs have little ears, because every spring since, the house has been filled with the sweet smell of their blossoms.

In the parable, we're never told if the tree bore any fruit. It's left a mystery. It's for you and me to live out the ending for ourselves. It's for you and me to finish the parable. It's for you and me to do the daily work of repentance and to bear good fruit for the Lord.

We know God is patient. In 2 Peter 3, some in the Early Church were wondering why the Lord hadn't already returned in glory as promised. Peter answers them, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise . . . but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should repent." God is very patient, but his patience doesn't last forever. One day – God alone knows when – That Day will come and the opportunity to repent and believe the Good News will have passed. The Bible says those who die in their sins will be lost forever. "Seek the Lord while he may be found" Isaiah wrote. "Call on him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Is. 55:6). The Lord isn't looking to condemn anyone. He gets no pleasure in that. His pleasure is to have mercy on the repentant and to abundantly pardon.

Traditionally, this parable is known as "The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree." Maybe that's a misnomer, because it's not so much about the tree's barrenness as it is about the vinedresser's intercession. This gardener isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Can you see him out there, on his hands and knees underneath the tree, digging and uprooting any scraggly vegetation, loosening the hardened soil, working in the manure. Can you see him out there sweat running down his dusty forearms? Somehow he has a sense of compassion even for a tree. It sounds very much like Jesus who has a heart for the lost, compassion even for the wicked who need

forgiveness. It all sounds very much like Jesus who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty for us. It sounds like Jesus who shows love to the loveless that they might lovely be.

Notice, Luke does not destroy the severity of the Law in this text by mixing grace into it. Nor does he destroy the sweetness of the Gospel by infusing it with Law. The Law has bite to it here: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." We must let those words stand. He means what he says. But then follows the Gospel, with the vinedresser putting himself between the owner and the tree and asking for more time. He's going to do everything he can to save that tree. The Law: "Cut it down." The Gospel: "Sir, leave it alone this year also." The Law: "Why should it take up space?" The Gospel: "Let me work on it some more."

Some of you might be thinking of your grown children right about now. They've had nothing to do with the church for some time. It fills you with sorrow . . . and fear. But I want you to remember not just the Law in this text, but the gracious vinedresser of this parable: his patience, his compassion, his persistence, his courage before the owner. See him on his hands and knees working the soil.

You are not alone in your love and concern for your children. There is One working with you, who knows your son or daughter, loves them more than you do, and has not given up on them. He's planning to work on them some more, just like the vinedresser with that fig tree.

I've known parents who have prayed, cajoled, even begged their children to come back to the faith, (or to find a church home where they live), with no results. Year after year, it's always the same. They seem to be just living for themselves, and for the moment. No real fruit to speak of. Maybe they make a small donation here to the Humane Society, a little effort there to help someone out, a little quiet guilt here over something, a little hope there that perhaps there exists a God of mercy. But no genuine fruit befitting repentance and faith. The tree is all but barren, though it's well past the time when fruit could reasonably be expected. Some parents, even while they're dying, give it one last try

and reach out to their kids. But cold, hard hearts are not easily warmed by the pleas of a parent. Often it takes someone else, something else.

Then, years later, something happens, (or nothing in particular happens), but some switch is flicked. The seed is cast and, for the first time, it lands on soil that is ready to receive it. The Word of God is heard, or remembered and welcomed. The prodigal turns away from his filth, and finally starts making his way home. The Holy Spirit works when and where he wills. And after so many years of steadfast unbelief, after so many years of the tree being barren, after so many years of the patient and persistent work of the vinedresser, figs at last!

God is patient. God is persistent. He loves you and your children. His cross shows you just how far he is willing to go. He will do at least as much as he has promised. Often, he does more.

Give thanks to the vinedresser who intercedes for us. Give thanks to the One with dirty, bloodied hands. Give thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

