

Sermon

Lent 3C March 23, 2025

Luke 13:1-9

“Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” So Jesus answers when asked if the people killed by Pilate were worse sinners than other people. And he basically says the same thing about 18 people who were killed when a tower collapsed on them.

I’ve talked about this before, but there’s a long line of bad theology attributing bad luck to bad behavior. Your cancer is not the result of sins you have committed. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time is not because God placed you there to be punished. Your chronic pain is not due to a lack of faith. Sometimes life just happens and bad things happen. That’s not to say that bad decisions don’t cause pain and suffering, because they can (see: drunk driving); but pain and suffering are not the result of God punishing us for our sins.

So what was Jesus getting at when he said, “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did?”

First of all, this is not a “repent or die” statement. Jesus is not saying that if you don’t repent, God will strike you dead or send you to hell. What this is, though, is a recognition that we all die. Some people will die early because of an illness. Some people will die unexpectedly because of an accident. Some will live many years before death comes calling. We all die, that is just a fact of life. What Jesus is addressing here comes from The Great Litany when we ask to be delivered “from dying suddenly and unprepared” (more proof that Jesus was an Episcopalian).

We all die. And, fortunately or unfortunately, none of us are born with a visible expiration date. But the fact of the matter is that none of us gets out of here alive. These stories of those killed by Pilate and by the collapsing tower, as well as the parable of the fig tree, are not about death, but about preparation.

Part of our preparation for death, then, is to make time on a regular basis for confession, repentance, and amendment of life in order to continually live in a right relationship with God. We are in the season of Lent – the season of self-examination, fasting, and penitence. We can, and probably should, do those things more often, but this season addresses them directly. We examine our lives and

conduct to see where we have harmed others and/or behaved in ways contrary to the will of God. We should fast from those things which draw us away from God with an eye toward making a permanent change. We should make time to honestly confess our sins with the goal of making amends and beginning anew

Lent is the season of honesty. Just because we think we're right about something doesn't make it so. It takes courage to admit we were wrong. It takes honesty and courage to admit we have sinned and repent. We all sin, but we are not always honest. And as we heard at the beginning of the service, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

Repentance isn't just about private piety – it's also about how our society treats others.

If we work toward being in a right relationship with God, then we should also work toward being in a right relationship with others. Jesus said the two greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbor. You can't claim to love God and then act and speak in hateful ways against your neighbor. As John says, "Those who say they love God and hate a brother or sister are liars. For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they haven't seen."

And who is our neighbor?

Just a couple of chapters earlier, Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan. Over time we've Disney-fied this parable, but when Jesus first told it, it was shocking. Shocking because he deliberately used a member of a despised ethnic group as the hero. It is the poor, the hungry, the foreigner, the Different Other who are our neighbors. These are the people God cares about, and we should be better at how we treat them.

Another authorized Confession found in supplemental liturgical sources says, "we repent of the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf." Sins of racism, both personal and national, the evils of segregation upheld by official policies, or policies that are designed to put down women and minorities, fall into this category. We need to be honest about these sins, repent, and work to put an end to them. But if we as individuals and as a nation are unwilling to confront past and current

behaviors toward the Other, if we are unwilling to repent of those sins, we risk dying separated from God and unprepared for the consequences.

The parable Jesus tells of the fig tree speaks to this. For three years a fig tree did not produce fruit. The landowner wanted to cut it down, but the gardener said, "Wait for one year, let me put manure around it and care for it. Then if it doesn't produce fruit, you can cut it down."

In this parable, it's important to recognize that continuing in sinful practices will not allow us to bear good fruit. That extra year tells us there is time to repent. But being honest about our sins, confessing our sins, and repenting of our sins is uncomfortable; and sometimes going through that process can feel like we've been buried in manure. But what comes from that, hopefully, is good fruit brought on by a change in our life.

We all sin and we all die. May we have the courage to repent of those sins which draw us away from God and harm our neighbor. May we live lives worthy of that repentance. And may our repentance help prepare us to live in a right relationship with God and neighbor.

Amen.