

“Standing Up to the Truth About Ourselves” – Luke 13:1-9

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Gracious God, thank you for your nourishing and nurturing love. As we continue this Lenten journey together, may we open our hearts to your Spirit, listen for your call, and be open to transformation and renewal. Amen.

During this season of Lent, we are reflecting on multiple aspects of resiliency in our faith and in our lives, various ways of standing up for what is important and courageously facing the challenges that come our way. And today we're taking a look at what are arguably parallel themes of the need for repentance and the need for spiritual nourishment.

And, I just want to say right off of the bat, if the word repentance brings up some spiritual baggage for you (because it does for some people), I hope our scripture and this sermon might help us reframe it a bit.

Our scripture lesson today from Luke's gospel opened with a jarring reminder of human suffering. As Jesus was teaching, some people who were there told him that Pilate had killed a group of Galileans while they were worshiping. What a horrible thing.

And from Jesus' response to them, we get the impression that these folks were asking him if this was some kind of divine punishment. What awful thing did they do to deserve such a terrible fate? It wasn't an uncommon question. A popular assumption at the time was that sin caused calamity.

Right away, Jesus debunks the idea that the people Pilate killed (or any other victim of tragedy) were any worse sinners than anyone else. Their particular actions or inactions, imperfections or mistakes did not cause this act of brutality. God didn't cause it either. Pilate made that dreadful choice. Jesus goes on to mention a terrible accident that killed eighteen people when a tower collapsed. Those folks didn't deserve that either. That tower's collapse was an accident, not an act of God.

And we should remember that God doesn't control everything. Humans have free will. And there is freedom in the created order itself.

However, Jesus' response in this moment may still seem awfully harsh to us (at least the way Luke presents it). No, they weren't any worse sinners than any of you. But, if you don't repent, their fate will be your own. Yikes! What do we do with that?

Let us first remember that Jesus was teaching. And, in this teaching moment, I think what is going on here is that Jesus is challenging his students to allow their existential anxiety to lead them to growth. They know that they are mortal and will die. They know that life is uncertain

and fragile. They know all too well the reality of violence and tragedy in their world. And they've just experienced another grim reminder of it. We know these things too.

So, the question before them and us is how does that uncomfortable knowledge inform our living? With a bit of urgency, Jesus asks all who hear to consider if we need to make a change. Is there something that is blocking us? Preventing our best, deepest, most engaged living? Getting in the way of the loving, peaceful, and just relationships we seek?

And, if so, then there is no time like the present to make a change. I think Jesus is saying don't wait until it's too late. Repent and live life to its fullest today.

And, as I mentioned, when we consider our need for repentance, I'd like to encourage us to think a little more broadly. We may be used to thinking of repentance as being primarily individual: I've done something wrong and I feel really bad about it. So, I say I'm sorry, I ask for forgiveness from God and from whoever I've hurt, and I take steps to make it right. It is that. And we all need to do that from time to time.

But I think we can also understand repentance more broadly and holistically as an attitude of openness to growth. And this is an attitude we can choose for ourselves as individuals, as well as encourage and support in our various relationships and communities (including church).

Along our journeys of life and faith, we are all challenged at times to open our minds and our hearts, to change course or venture out in a new direction, to learn something from another's experience and let that change the way we think, operate, and help shape the world around us.

And I think this more holistic understanding of repentance can help us as we seek to confront the big systemic sins in our world and seek a better, more just, and more peaceful future for all. That takes our collective willingness to change and grow. And growth requires nurture, attention, and love.

So, Jesus tells this story about a fig tree that a man planted in his vineyard. For three years in a row, he came looking for fruit... but there was none, zip, nada, no figs. "Cut it down," he said to his gardener. "Why should it take up valuable space and soil in my vineyard if it's not going to produce fruit?" "Give it another year," says the gardener. "Let me dig around it and give it some manure (some good old-fashioned fertilizer) and let's see what happens." So, the tree gets a new lease on life, at least for a year. And we're left wondering and hoping that this gardener's care works, and it produces fruit.

Along with olives and grapes, figs were a sweet and tasty staple of the ancient Mediterranean diet. And so, figs and fig trees are mentioned several times in the Bible. Fig cakes were also common rations for soldiers that could be easily carried and stored for later use. And figs were even used in making poultices to treat skin problems like boils. Figs are fruit that brought delight, nourishment, and even healing.

And these amazing little fruits come from fairly hearty trees that can take root in rocky or sandy soil, and once mature, bear fruit for as many as fifty years. But the experts say they do need some fertilizer now and then. You know a fig tree needs to be fertilized when it starts showing symptoms of slow growth or pale leaves.

So, the gardener in our parable knew what he was talking about. In order to bear fruit, this fig tree may have just needed a little love. It needed the proper nutrients and care. And it needed the time and space for that care and love to make a difference.

That's true of us too, isn't it?

Like the fig tree, we are all called to bear spiritual fruit into the world that delights, nourishes, and heals.

Like the fig tree, we are also heartier than some might think, able to find our roots, our grounding in God's love, even in rocky terrain and shifting sands.

And like the fig tree, we also need a little help sometimes in order to thrive and bear those spiritual fruits of love. We need to be nourished, nurtured, cared for, and loved.

And the good news is that nourishment is available to us. God, like a good gardener, tends to us with love, grace, and compassion.

And when we're feeling a little peaky or pale, a little tired, a little weak, we can seek out these good spiritual nutrients of God in various ways. We can ask for some spiritual fertilizer: We can pray. We can turn to wisdom and insights of scripture. We can worship together. We can study together. We can learn together and from each other. We can engage in community fellowship and deepen and broaden our relationships. We can serve others. And we can learn something from those whom we seek to serve.

And you know, it's interesting and wonderful how love grows in both ways at once as we do these things. We soak up the nourishing love we need. And we bear the fruit of love into the world. Both can happen at the same time.

And boy does the world ever need us to root ourselves in God's love and bear more spiritual fruit into the world. Your acts of love and the spiritual gifts you have to offer are needed. And they make a difference.

We're not unlike the folks Jesus was speaking to that day when he told this story. We too have been shaken, heartbroken, and angered by recent tragedy. The war in Ukraine is weighing on us. The moral depravity of this decision to invade. The senseless violence. The ensuing humanitarian crisis. Worries about what happens next. It's a lot to carry.

And such a big, overwhelming situation like this can leave us feeling pretty powerless and hopeless. I know I've been struggling to hold onto hope.

And yet, somehow, I do hang on to hope (if only by a thread some days). I can't give up hope altogether. And that must be the grace of God at work. I suppose that's where I've experienced some of that spiritual fertilizer in recent weeks when I've been feeling pretty peaky, pale, and drained.

I can't give up hope because I do believe that love makes a difference. In individual lives, in the world, love makes a difference.

And I think this teaching moment of Jesus invites us, in the face of life's fragility and challenges, with the knowledge of our own vulnerability, to live with love each day as though it were our last. To ask ourselves how we might live every day as the gift from God that it is; to use today as an opportunity to utilize the gifts we have been given to bear some loving fruit in all the ways that we can.

And though we may not be able to resolve the war, we can help.

We can let our generosity be deepened by our concern and support organizations that are helping refugees. Our Missions Commission has already made donations to help refugees both from Ukraine and Afghanistan and you can too. See the Carillon for details. Every amount helps.

We can let our heartbreak deepen our capacity for compassion. We can stand in solidarity with those who suffer. Thank you to Jeff and Darlene Gidley for lighting up the church in blue and yellow as a visible sign of solidarity and reminder to pray.

We can pray for those who are persecuted. We can also pray for those who persecute that they may have a change of heart.

We can allow our dismay at the violence renew our commitment to peacemaking in every sphere where we have influence.

And, as we do these things, we can support one another and encourage one another. We can listen to each other with compassion. We can hold safe space for each other's feelings.

What we can't do is give up.

And in order to keep going, keep growing, and keep bearing the spiritual fruit of love we are called to bear, we have to keep rooting ourselves in God's love.

When the soil feels like it is shifting beneath us, when the ground is rocky and rough, we may need to dig in even deeper. We may need to ask God for some spiritual fertilizer. But in all things and all times, we can put our trust in the divine gardener who has planted us and nurtured us thus far.

Because God longs for our collective growth. God longs for our thriving.

God doesn't want us to cut each other down.

God wants a fruitful vineyard, an orchard, a garden that produces an abundant harvest of delight, nourishment, and healing for all God's beloved children.

So we better keep growing.

Amen.