

Rev. Lisa Schrott

3-20-22

Luke 13:1-9

Healing Through Repentance

As we continue our Lenten journey to the cross and the empty tomb, we are doing so through the lens of healing – a call to seek wholeness in body, mind and spirit. A call to recognize the places in our own lives where there is brokenness or despair, places where the fabric is frayed and our spirits feel defeated. This morning we will consider how repentance can be a stage in our journey of healing. Our text is parable from the Gospel of Luke. It is not one of the feel-good parables of Jesus. It is a challenging text that asks us to take an honest look at our lives and the world around us, and to seek ways to heal the breaches. Hear now these words from Luke 13.

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ The gardener replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

On the first day of spring, it is fitting to have a parable that takes place in a vineyard – that speaks to the promise of growth and new life. The promise – that our trees and our life will bear fruit – and on a beautiful and warm Sunday morning after a dreary Saturday of rain – we celebrate that promise. And yet – and yet we live in a world where it is all too clear that not every tree bears fruit. This section of the Gospel of Luke casts a dark shadow, with a world that is not living into the promise of the Kingdom. In the prior chapter we hear that crowds had gathered by the thousands to hear Jesus. Jesus alternates speaking to his disciples and the crowds, giving them ominous warnings about the times in which they are living. Our scripture begins with a kind of cryptic reference to tragedies that had recently occurred in the community. I say cryptic because we don’t have any details in scripture of these events, but they must have been well known to the community to whom Jesus was speaking. They tell of

a reality that is full of tragedy, and as one commentator noted, "...it is a reality that will have its disruptive effects on family life, economics, religious traditions, and human destiny."¹

Sounds kind of familiar doesn't it. In fact, it sounds like the opening of our scripture passage this morning is ripped straight from our current headlines. A group has gathered and asked Jesus – how can this be? Christian author and editor Rodney Clapp describes the scene, with the people saying to each other, "Pilate and his Roman minions – when did they not commit atrocities, but here was an occasion – have you heard?- when he (Pilate) sent soldiers into the sacred precincts of the temple and had men – our countrymen!-cut down like lambs to the slaughter. ... What could possibly be more violent, more repressible, more deserving of condemnation? What could more clearly set us apart from true wickedness."² Yes, ripped straight from our headlines today. And before the crowds could erupt with self-righteous anger about Pilate's action or before they could say out loud a common misconception of that day – well really of any day – that somehow the people who were killed deserved it for some sin they had committed, Jesus flips the script and comes right out and says, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Whoa – wait a second Jesus, how did I get complicit in this whole mess?

And Jesus follows with news of another tragedy that has befallen the community – a tower that fell and killed 18 people. And in case the crowds did not get Jesus' command to repent the first time, Jesus asks the crowds if they think that those who died in this tragedy were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Unless you repent... unless you repent... It is not surprising that this passage of scripture that calls us to repentance appears in our cycle of three year scripture readings known as the lectionary during the season of Lent. Lent is the time in the church year when we talk about repenting – turning away from sin and turning toward God. We started Lent on Ash Wednesday with another scripture calling us to repent for our sins – those acts that keep us separated from God and each other. We will come back to repentance again in Holy Week as we partake of the Last Supper and sit at the foot of the cross on Good Friday.

Our parable this morning sits at the end of long discourse where Jesus emphasizes the importance and the urgency of repentance. Story after story emphasizes the need to turn from the ways of the world and turn toward God. And to do it now. Keep your lamps trimmed

¹Daniel Deffenbaugh. Theological Perspective Luke 13:1-9. *Feasting on the Word Commentary Year C Volume 2*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016 p.92

² Rodney Clapp, Pastoral Perspective. Luke 13:1-9. *Feasting on the Word Commentary Year C Volume 2*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016 p.94

and ready – for God could come at any time. It is as if there is a train gaining speed as it rumbles down the tracks: The time has come to change your ways! Right here, right now!³

And because Jesus knows that saying the words “repent or you will perish” is something we may not be able to wrap our heads around or really even know how to start doing, he gives us a parable. Not a warm and fuzzy parable, but a parable of warning about a fig tree that is not bearing fruit. When the owner of the land sees that the tree has yet to produce figs, he tells the gardener to chop it down, saying, “it has been three years and I’ve gotten nothing from it. It is taking up space, wasting valuable resources.” Ouch.

And then the gardener, with a beautiful plea for mercy says, “wait – let me dig around it and put manure on it. Let me help it bear fruit. Let me take away the rocks and the weeds that are constricting its life; let me prune away the barriers and the anger, the envy and the greed. Let me take them away. And let me replace them with nutritious soil, rich compost that nurtures life through our connectedness; energy and warmth and the very breath of life. And then master, if the tree bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, then you can cut it down.”

Judgement tempered with mercy. That is the message of the fig tree. Yes – there is judgment. And – yes there is mercy. And the parable helps us to see how we live in that tension and what it looks like to repent. To take away those things that choke the life from us and to replace them with that which gives life. An agricultural model of repentance. To take away and to add back is what we do when we repent.

In both Old and New Testament scriptures the act of repentance consists of two aspects, turning away from that which is a breach in the relationship between one and another or one and God and turning toward God so that one can engage in new thoughts or behaviors to repair or restore the breach. Dig up and add in – the gardener of the fig tree tells us.

From a theological perspective in the Reformed tradition, we have John Calvin to thank for deepening our understanding of repentance. Repentance also has two faces for Calvin – death of a corrupt sinful nature and new life in the Spirit of God. Calvin refers to these processes as mortification of the flesh and vivification of the spirit. Calvin defines repentance as “departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new.... it is the true turning of our life to God.”⁴ Repentance is a process of transformation by which our old sinful self **dies** and a new life **arises**. And although Calvin was writing in the 1500’s, his language anticipates how contemporary neuroscience describes the way our brains are modified to allow new behavior to emerge, a concept known as neural or synaptic plasticity. From the moment our neurons begin assembling what will

³ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/20/life-and-death-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

⁴ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeill. 2 Vols. Library of Christian Classics. Westminster John Knox Press, 1960. I.XIII.14,138, III.III.1,592 and III.iii.5,597

become the brain until brain function ceases when our earthly life ends, our brains have the capacity to be remodeled, reshaped and re-formed. Some of this plasticity is chemical in nature, some electrical in nature, and some architectural – the actual cells and their connection change shape and size. Unused and unneeded connections and cells are pruned – yes that is the word neuroscientists used – pruned – just like the fig tree. And new cells can be born and integrated into already formed networks. Calvin was on to something – we actually do take off our former mind and put on a new mind and in this process we receive healing.

Digging around the roots and adding manure. Turning away from sin - getting rid of that which is holding us back from living the life the God calls us to; acknowledging our missteps, our narrow perspective, our failures to love God and love neighbor. We receive healing, we become more whole when we prune from our lives that which separates us from God and each other. Just like trees need pruning to grow and bear fruit, we too need to prune from our lives the dead foliage that blocks the light from reaching our hearts and minds and souls.

Digging around the roots and adding manure. Turning towards God – embracing the gift of grace; spending time in prayer and study to get to know God and God’s will for our lives; seeking reconciliation for relationships that have splintered or come crashing down; committing to being agents of hope and possibility amidst despair. We receive healing, we become more whole when we spread life-giving nutrients around our roots so that our branches can grow strong and bear fruit. Why do we repent? We come alive as we arch forward toward the image of God. And the fruit that we bear matters in this world. It matters when we prioritize caring for our environment – tending God’s creation; when we prioritize caring for each other -nurturing relationships. It matters when we prioritize justice and mercy – being voices for those who have been pushed to the margins by our sins of greed and selfishness; when we prioritize being in the presence of God – experiencing God’s love and grace. Yes – we have much to turn away from, but the gift of healing through repentance is that we also have much to turn toward; toward building a beloved community. We sang of this vision of building in our first hymn this morning, “Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace; let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: All are welcome here.”⁵ Yes, all are welcome on this journey to the cross and the empty tomb, as we seek healing through repentance. Join me in prayer.

⁵ Marty Haugen, Let Us Build a House. All Are Welcome Here. *Glory to God Hymnal* #301. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013