

"Agree With Me, Jesus?"

Luke 13:1-9
Marshfield First Presbyterian

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Perhaps you have heard the saying, "*The day you are born you begin to die.*" Now there is a pleasant thought! That is what you have come to church to hear! Every day since the day of your birth, you have been marching toward the day you will die.

(There is a little joke about the certainty of death. "A minister was visiting a country church, and he began his sermon with a stirring reminder:

"Everyone in this parish is going to die!"

"The minister looked around. He noticed a man in the front pew, smiling broadly.

"Why are you so amused?" he asked.

"I'm not from this parish," the man said. *"I'm just visiting my sister for the weekend."*)

-p.231, Mitch Albom, *Have a Little Faith*, Hyperion Books

Don't you wish you could pass on dying?

Some days I hate this job. Like today when God's Word compels me, the preacher, to tell you something you'd probably rather not hear. Today's biblical message in Luke 13 is "*repent or perish*". Today's Word from God calls us to cut out the dead branches of our faith. The Word of God calls us to cultivate and fertilize the tree of faith that it may bear new fruit.

Luke was writing to a kingdom in crisis. The people in the nation of Israel were in spiritual and political crisis. In another forty years Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed. In the midst of this foment a crowd of people engaged Jesus in a discussion about the existence of evil and the relationship between sin and suffering and death.

The crowd **first** cites a story of human evil. They told Jesus that Pilate had murdered some Galileans and mingled their blood with the blood of sacrifices in the Temple. The **second** incident the crowd cites is a tale of natural evil. We might call it a natural disaster. A tower in Siloam had fallen. It had crushed and killed 18 people.

Reading between the lines, the crowd implies that the people who died in the Temple or under the tower got what they deserved. They suffered death for their sins. The severity of the punishment matched the severity of their sins. You say people don't really think that way? Come on, now.

(A few weeks ago a prominent evangelist went on national television and proclaimed that the Haitians brought the earthquake upon themselves for the sins they had committed.)

(Furthermore, I don't know how many times I have personally heard people say in pain and anguish, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this terrible thing happening to me?")

Jesus' response to the crowds' implicit judgment of others was, "Baloney!" He asks, "Do you think that these people who perished in the Temple were worse sinners than all the Galileans?" And, "Do you think that those 18 crushed by the tower were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" (13:2,4) He answers his own question and turns the table, "No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." (13:3,5)

TODAY'S GOSPEL LESSON IN LUKE IS NOT A COMFORTING ONE, "REPENT OR PERISH!" IT MAKES ONE SHUDDER. BUT THAT IS ONLY ONE HALF OF THE GOSPEL. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF REPENTANCE, IS FORGIVENESS AND LIFE. THE OTHER HALF OF THE GOSPEL IS THE TRUTH, "REPENT AND YOU WILL RECEIVE FORGIVENESS AND LIFE."

It is not our job to judge people and speculate about the consequences of their sins. That's God's job. It's not our job to focus on people's failures to measure up. That's God's job. And God is a lot more merciful and a lot more forgiving than we are. That is the point of the parable of the Fig Tree. The fig tree is Israel. The fig tree is the Church. Some would say, "Cut it down. Enough already. It's had enough time to bear fruit and it hasn't." The Gardener in the parable, God or Jesus, says, "No, let me cultivate around the roots of the fig tree one more year and put more fertilizer on it. Then, if it doesn't produce fruit, **you** can cut it down.." Notice the Gardener still refuses to destroy the tree.

As followers of Jesus, we are people of the cross. Why do we chafe? We must die. Lent is about dying so that we may live. We die to self. We die to sin. We let go of judging others. We empty ourselves that God may fill us. For in dying, we rise to new life.

(During the eight years Mitch Albom was getting to know his rabbi, Albert Lewis, who had invited him to do his eulogy, he was also getting to know a Protestant minister. Mitch had moved from Boston to Detroit and wrote for the newspaper. He got to know about a remarkable minister, Henry Covington, who was doing amazing things with the homeless in an inner city that half the time didn't have heat or electricity. Mitch visited Henry one day.

"Henry sat on a small couch in his front room . . . He was suffering a head cold and he coughed several times. His place was tidy but poor, the paint was peeling, and the ceiling in the kitchen had partially collapsed. He seemed more pensive than usual. Maybe it was the holiday. His walls held photos of his children, but it was clear they weren't getting a lot of Christmas presents this year.

In his drug dealing days, if Henry wanted a TV, customers would trade him one for dope. Jewelry? Designer clothes? He didn't even need to leave his house.

I asked if he ever thought, when he entered the ministry, that one day he might be doing better than he was?

"No", he said. *"I think I was meant to work with the poor."*
Yeah, I joked, but you don't have to *imitate* them.
He looked around at the crumbling house. He drew a deep breath.
"I'm where I'm supposed to be."
How do you mean?
He lowered his eyes.
Then he said something I will never forget.

"Mitch, I am an awful person. The things I have done in my life, they can never be erased. I have broken every one of the Ten Commandments."

Come on. Every one?

"Yes."

Adultery?

"Umm-hmm."

Murder?

"I never pulled the trigger, but I was involved enough. I could have stopped things before a life was taken. I didn't. So I was involved in a murder."

He looked away.

"It was a cutthroat business, dog eat dog, the strong preying on the weak. In the lifestyle I was in, people were killed. It happened every day."

"I hate that person I was. I went to prison for a crime I did not do, but I did things out here that I should have gone back for. I was cowardly. I was hard. That may not be who I am now, but it's who I was."

He sighed. *"It's who I was."*

His chin dropped to his chest. I heard his nasal breathing, in and out.

"I deserve hell," he whispered. *"The things I've done, God would be justified. God is not mocked. What you sow, you reap."*

"That's why I tell my congregation, don't put me on a pedestal. I sermonize about wanting cherries when you're planting lemons, but I've planted many lemons in my life. . ."

His eyes were teary now.

". . . and I may not have reaped all that harvest."

I don't understand, I said. If you think you're going to be punished –

"Why still serve God?" he smiled weakly. *"What else can I do? It's like when everyone was turning away, and Jesus asked the apostles, 'Will you go, too?'"* And Peter said, *"Where can I go, Lord?"*

"I know what he meant. Where do you go from God? He's everywhere."

But, Henry, all the good you do here --

"No." He shook his head. *"You can't work your way into heaven. Anytime you try and justify yourself with works, you disqualify yourself with works. What I do here, every day, for the rest of my life, is only my way of saying, 'Lord, regardless of what eternity holds for me, let me give something back to you. I know it don't even no scorecard. But let me make something of my life before I go . . .'"*

He exhaled a long weary breath.

"And then, Lord, I'm at your mercy."

It was late and cold and Henry's past was all over the room. After a few silent minutes, I stood and zipped my coat. I wished him the best, and went back out into the snow.)

pp. 218-221, Mitch Albom, *Have a Little Faith*, 2009, Hyperion Books.

The other side of the message of "repent or perish" is not judging others. It is humbly confessing our sins and receiving the forgiveness and life God offers in the Crucified & Risen Christ.

I told you I didn't want to tell you what I had to tell you on the 3rd Sunday in Lent. "Repent or perish!" I wish I could have preached a more welcoming, inviting, comforting text.

But then you wouldn't have gotten the full import of the message, like that old Gospel hymn, "*What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*"

The New Israel, with Christ as Head and the Church as the body, needs to repent and ask God's help in overcoming a critical spirit. Having repented, then, God calls the Church back to its primary purpose, to meet suffering with mission . . . to meet blame with redemption. May the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit enable repentance, forgiveness and new life in this Season of Lent.