

Lent 3-March 20, 2022

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Luke 13:1-9

## “Unless YOU Repent” Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen*

Why do bad things happen to good people? It is this ageless question that prevents many people from believing in God. In today's gospel reading this question goes even deeper. The people that came to Jesus not only want to know the reason for suffering and evil, but also want Jesus to compare their goodness to the sinfulness of others. They think their ticket to salvation is given to them if they are not worse sinners when compared to other people who you can pick out of the crowd because of the suffering that seems to fall on them.

This was the rationale that as scripture says **those who were present** began their conversation with Jesus. We don't know who these people were, nor does it really matter, because their question to Jesus might have easily come from any one of us. I think each of us could be found guilty of at one time or another believing that we know the reason why someone has trouble. We know that someone lost their job because they have a history of never being able to keep a job very long. We seem to know that the reason that someone is going through bankruptcy is because of the poor financial decisions they clearly have made. It doesn't come as a surprise to us when someone has a health issue because they failed to heed the warnings from using harmful substances. We think tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes strike nations that don't believe as we do. Whenever we listen to a tragic story in the news, we either are quick to explain why it happened. We like to think that we often know what God knows and why wouldn't we want to tell other people that our thoughts are like God's.

When these people told Jesus about Galileans that perished by the hand of Pilate, they didn't tell this story to Jesus in case he had missed the news headlines. They didn't offer their commentary while the tragedy occurred. They were curious that Jesus would give them an explanation for why this happened specifically to those Galileans. They had hoped that Jesus would respond by saying, “These people perished because they had not repented for something they had done wrong.” They had hoped Jesus might respond that these sinners got what they deserved. When Jesus responded, he didn't even mention the event or the people who perished. Instead he turned the attention away from the new story and made the story they told Jesus about the sins of others about their sinfulness. Jesus said, “Unless YOU repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

These people didn't expect Jesus' response. They weren't prepared for Jesus to turn the attention away from this story about other people and make it about themselves. They probably would have been happy to chalk this encounter with Jesus as a failure and just go back home, but Jesus was not done with them. Before they could walk away, Jesus asked them to consider another tragedy. Jesus told them to turn to another page in the Galilean Gazette and read about the tragedy where 18 innocent people were killed by a tower that collapsed. Jesus asked them if this tragedy was a case of 18 people who were just at the wrong place at the

wrong time or had each of these 18 people done something to deserve their fate? Before these people get any chance to answer, Jesus responds to them exactly the same as he did when they wanted an answer about the tragedy that they described about the mingled blood in the temple. Jesus once again turned this story about a tragedy and the sins of others into a call for the repentance of **their** sins.

These two stories left these people in quite a quandary. They went from believing people were saved from perishing by doing the right things or at least doing less bad things than other people. Jesus told them that they were no better off than anyone else and the only way they could be saved from their eternal destruction was repentance. Jesus had given them the answer to their salvation. The only problem was they didn't know what it meant to repent. They had the false understanding that repentance was accomplished by simply being sorry for something you have done wrong. They believed if they looked inwardly toward themselves, they would repent.

Jesus continues to lead the teaching about repentance by telling them a parable about a man who planted a fig tree. This man's problem was that the tree was not bearing any figs. Not one evidence of fruit. I already am quick to blame the man for his unfruitful tree as I wondered, why did he plant a fig tree in a vineyard? Once again, I am guilty of thinking he must have done something wrong. But once again, Jesus did not tell this parable to point out the fault of the man's placement of the tree. You might even be inclined to find fault in this man for not reaching out for some help before three years had passed. This man has given up any hope that the tree will ever bear a single fig, so he says, "Cut it down."

But almost unnoticed in this parable is the most important of all characters. More important than the fig tree or the whole vineyard. More important than the man who chose to plant a fig tree in the midst of a vineyard. After everyone else's ideas about making the fig tree fruitful there is a turn in the story. A turn to the gardener. The one who was always there and taking care of the vineyard so that it would be productive. The destiny of the fig tree was now in the care of the gardener.

This is what repentance is all about. The word repent does not mean to feel sorry. It means to turn. It means to turn away from comparing yourself to others and hoping you are better than them. It means turning away from looking at yourself and believing you are good enough. It means turning toward Jesus who has compassion on you.

When you turn around you will no longer see a mirror. You won't see an image of yourself. When you repent, you will turn your eyes upon Jesus. Times are not any different today than when Luke recorded this story about repentance. We are still guilty of comparing our goodness to the sinfulness of others. We still fail to first turn to Jesus for our salvation. However, Jesus who has always been caring for the vineyard is ready to make you fruitful. Today, Jesus has repented you. Through his Word, your eyes have been turned toward Jesus who is your salvation. Amen