

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 23, 2025

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Theme: Repentance invites us into fruit bearing life.

There is a wonderful area in Kansas City called the “Plaza” that is full of stores and restaurants and during the Christmas season is decked out in lights that outline all the buildings. It is definitely a tourist attraction, a great place to just walk around. The last few times I’ve gone to the Plaza, there was a man on the street corner with a portable microphone system, yelling at people as they walked by, warning them that if they didn’t repent and change their ways, they were going to hell. He was obviously very passionate and sincere, but I was tempted to ask him – do you really think you are doing any good, that anyone is really listening to you, that anyone is actually going to come to faith because you are yelling at them?

We are all familiar with the phrase you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Few of us respond well to be threatened or yelled at. We may temporarily change our behavior just to get the person off our back, but more often than not we get our backs up and become defensive and even more entrenched. There is an overabundance of yelling these days in the world around us. There are enough things that make us feel bad about ourselves. We really don’t need any more being dumped on us, especially in church, which is why we love the hymn, “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is calling . . . “ But in our gospel, Jesus uses words that paint a harsh picture of tragedy and death and there is nothing soft and tender about “ unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did!”

Our gospel begins with two stories of tragedies – an apparent massacre of Galileans (these were Jesus’ people) whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices. The added detail of mingling the blood with their sacrifices (during their religious ceremonies) just adds another layer of horror to the story. The second tragedy is a bit less gruesome but still horrific – an accident where a tower fell and crushed 18 workers. When these kinds of things happen, one of the first things we ask is “why,” thinking that somehow having an answer, a reason for the tragedies will lessen the pain and loss. But instead of providing some kind of comforting answer or explanation, Jesus launches into a call to repent, moving to the image of a fig tree which is to bear fruit and if it doesn’t cut it down! What is going on here? Perhaps the opportunity to understand repentance, not as a pronouncement of judgement, but as good

news that invites us into fruit bearing life. And that is the theme of my sermon this morning: Repentance invites us into fruit bearing life.

I realize I made quite a leap there – moving from what sounds like a harsh call of judgement to a life-giving invitation. But let's back up a bit to see if we can understand why Jesus focused on our repentance rather than trying to explain what happened to those people whose lives were tragically ended. As I said earlier, when tragedies happen, we want to know why. If there is just some reason that we can understand, then perhaps the universe is not as chaotic and random as it seems. We would rather deal with the illusion that we have control over our lives, can make good things happen and prevent the bad, than deal with the fear that these kinds of things could happen even to us without any warning. And so, we invest a lot into the premise of – you get what you deserve. Do good and you are rewarded. Mess up and you get punished. That's why bad things happen to people because they somehow deserve them, even though we know that is simply not true.

Remember the book written by Harold Kushner in 1981 – When Bad Things Happen to Good People? He addressed the conundrum of why – if the universe was created and is governed by a God who is good and loving, then why is there so much suffering and pain. It is the problem of evil. Kushner's argument is that God is indeed loving but finite, not all powerful to prevent evil. You may or may not find that answer helpful or comforting.

Other than flatly disputing the notion that tragedies are God's way of punishing evil people, Jesus doesn't speculate about the "why" of bad things happening, coming up with explanations that can make the universe seem less chaotic, more within our control, and easier for us to make judgements, on others, of course. The bottom line is that we are not in control. Life is fragile and tragedies happen. So instead of focusing on what happened to them, trying to explain past events, Jesus calls us to focus on now and on how we are called to live our fragile lives in a way that actually makes a difference in the chaos and tragedies by bearing fruit. He calls us to repent.

Repentance is not an expression of regret, feeling bad about what we did and promising to do better next time. Matt Skinner in his commentary reminds us that repentance "refers to a changed mind, a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different

perspective. . . . it has moral applications, but it cannot be reduced to a reengineered life and ethics . . . It refers to an entirely reoriented self, to a new consciousness of one's shortcomings and one's dire circumstances."

It is the invitation to reorient our entire selves toward God, trusting God who is patient and loving (in spite of what we sometimes experience in life) and God desires that we in the midst of all that is fragile, live abundantly, and produce abundant fruit. Reoriented toward God, trusting God's love more than answers, explanations, our own need to control, we can be honest about our shortcomings. I would really rather be the one in the driver's seat, the master of my own destiny than trust a God who doesn't always give any explanation. And we can be honest about how random and frightening life can be. A woman who never smoked dies of lung cancer. A couple who has so much love to give cannot conceive a child. A hard worker loses their job when the company downsizes. A tornado rips through a town destroying buildings and taking lives. We could go on and on. But the call of repentance is God's gift to us – the call to look not to what was or wasn't, but what can now be. In the midst of all the tragedies and heartache, the challenges and struggles, there is life, life that we are called to live so that we might bear fruits which make this life kinder, gentler, more loving for all.

A few years ago, Bishop Eaton, the presiding bishop of the ELCA, reminded us over and over again: "We are church. We are Lutheran. We are church together. We are church for the sake of the world. " For the sake of the world. Repentance reorients us toward God who reorients us out into the world that God so loves. We live not for ourselves but for the sake of others. We live to bear fruit. To help us bear this fruit, Jesus digs around in our preconceived notions of how the world operates. And certainly there are times when it seems like the "manure" gets piled on – all the challenges, and differences, you know those things that we are not always comfortable dealing with but which we often end up learning a lot from. The point is not to make our lives more miserable – there are enough tragedies already in the world – but to open us up, enabling us to sink our roots deep into God's love so that our branches can grow wide into the world, bearing God's love to all.

I have really been struggling with the "state of our country" these days. There have always been approaches and opinions about the complex issues we face, but this feels like

more than that. There is so much meanness and hostility – the tone of voices used as others are condemned and even ridiculed; so much that feels wrong; so much that makes me wonder – what can I do? What should we do? As followers of Jesus, what we can and must do is bear the fruits of the Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control. Imagine a world where those ways of being, those values, those actions, were prominent. When tragedies did happen, when times are confusing, scary and even hostile, bearing these fruits produce the hope we need to carry on. That is why Jesus calls us, not softly and tenderly, but loudly and boldly, to repent. He does not want us to perish into despair and fear. He wants us to live and help others live. It is that important; that urgent. The world needs the fruit that lives that reoriented to God can and do produce. The world needs us. We are the gift that God gives the world. Amen