

**Sermon – Mar 24, 2019 – Lent 3 - Luke 13:1-9**

13At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>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? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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?’ <sup>8</sup>He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

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Repentance is the key to fruitfulness; that is what I am going to talk about this morning. 'Repentance' is not a 'comfortable' word is it?...But repentance is not what you think either. We will get back to this, but first:

Have you ever watched the movie 'Places in the Heart'?... it is quite a few years ago now since it came out. Sally Field plays a woman who is suddenly left a widow with 2 young children when her husband is accidentally shot in 1935 in a small town in the American south.

In this movie, people suffer from calamities as they do in this morning's gospel. The young sheriff is shot and killed point blank. The young black man, the unwitting killer, is killed himself by outraged white town vigilantes. These deaths were sudden, shocking, unnecessary, just as the deaths of those gunned down in the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand last week. The pilgrims in this morning's Gospel, whose blood Pilate mingled with that of the temple sacrifices.... Were their deaths punishment for sins committed? No says Jesus. Their sins were not greater than anyone else's.

In the movie, others die in a severe storm, a 'twister', a natural calamity, just as hundreds have in the Cyclone Idai, the worst natural calamity ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere. Similarly, in the Gospel reading, people were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Were these people struck down because they were worse sinners than anyone else? No says Jesus. The point is that they had not repented when they died. They had not repented, they had not seen the light and so had not been redeemed by God's love and grace. They had not borne fruit and therein was the tragedy.

Jesus then tells the parable of the fig tree. As with all parables, there is a certain mystery...and we are challenged to figure it out...what is the meaning? There are 3 players; the man who had the fig tree planted, the fig tree itself and the gardener. The vineyard owner who has had the tree placed there, wants only what is best for the tree...he wants for it to fulfill its purpose and to be laden down with juicy figs. The fig tree isn't bearing fruit though and after 3 years the owner is ready to cut it down. But the gardener pleads for more time so he can give his services to the tree. He will loosen up the soil around the tree...then he will enrich the soil. We are left with the impression that what has been missing is the help of the gardener, and that with this key infusion of support, the tree will no longer be barren but rather that it will bear fruit.

The tree was no longer trying on its own...the gardener was there to nourish the tree.

Jesus' call to repent is a call to an encounter with God, a call to realize God is the framework upon which everything else rests. It is God who nourishes us, gives us purpose, meaning and hope in this difficult life.

Repentance names the change that occurs within us when God meets us and reshapes our understanding.

So Repentance results from an encounter with God.

“Repentance” is being found and reclaimed by someone who seeks us intently.

Repentance is like the ‘reset’ button...

Jesus doesn’t promise to change the world. His coming did not put an end to tyrants or stop buildings and meteorites from falling upon innocent passers-by. But he does offer a new perspective on what’s possible for us. He insists God can be encountered, even within this fragile human existence.

Repentance is a way of aligning ourselves with God who cares for all the world and seeks our help in ushering in relief and justice.

Repenting entails trust that, because of God’s commitment to us, what we read in the news is not the full story. Every disappointing or shocking news item includes a call to work for God’s grace, mercy, and justice, even if the grace lingers hidden below the fold.

Repentance requires taking in a whole new point of view; *looking at it God's way*. God simply asks us to **turn**. This is the way we accept His gift. When we do, certain outcomes are promised. If we don't, or we "turn back", alternate outcomes are promised.

We seek God as the Psalmist did—thirsting for him constantly because we know that our very life depends on him.

Robert Robinson was an English clergyman who lived in the 18th century. Not only was he a gifted pastor and preacher he was also a highly gifted poet and hymn writer. However, after many years in the pastorate his faith began to drift. He left the ministry and finished up in France, indulging himself in sin.

One night he was riding in a carriage with a Parisian socialite who had recently been converted to Christ. She was interested in his opinion on some poetry she was reading:

*Come thou Fount of every blessing, Tune my heart to sing thy grace,  
Streams of mercy never failing, Call for hymns of loudest praise.*

When she looked up from her reading the socialite noticed Robinson was crying.

“What do I think of it?” he asked in a broken voice. “I wrote it. But now I’ve drifted away from him and can’t find my way back.”

“But don’t you see” the woman said gently, “The way back is written right here in the third line of your poem: *Streams of mercy never ceasing*. Those streams are flowing even here in Paris tonight.”

That night Robinson recommitted his life to Christ.

A newspaper called 'The Thrifty Nickel', ran an ad that read:

*"We cater to Clutter. Dependable house, apartment or business cleaning."*

That ad could be OUR ad, it could be the Church's motto. **We cater to clutter.** We don't cater to the perfect. We don't cater to those who have already made it and have everything in its place. We cater to those who need help; those who are in a mess. We cater to those who need to be perfected and realize it. That's our whole purpose in being. God takes the outcast, the imperfect, the unfaithful, the tax collectors and sinners as the New Testament calls them and through God's divine love and grace, through Jesus digging around in our lives, loosening us up, feeding us extra spiritual nutrients, God perfects us and helps us bear fruit. God transforms us, helping us to bring life to the world, the life we were intended to bring. God gives new purpose to our lives. God caters to the clutter in our lives and helps us clean up.

There is a prayer in the funeral service which says,

**'Let us be mindful of the shortness and uncertainty of this earthly life.'**

Let us not waste another minute in futility, in trying to prosper on our own. Let us befriend the gardener. The gardener is anxious to remove our dead wood and debris and to feed us just what we need. This is Lent, a time of reflection. Spring is coming. The gardener is patient; waiting to excavate us. It is never too late. May we begin to grow and bear fruit just as God intends. Amen.