

Things Aren't Always as They Seem
Luke 13:1-9

I was truly honored when Pastor John asked if I would like to preach at Caldwell. I've been ready (so to speak) to face this challenge and have been really excited about the opportunity to share God's Word with you – you who have become kind of like a second family to me – which also makes this just a little more nerve-racking!

After we confirmed a date, I decided to stick to my guns(!) and instead of just choosing a scripture that suited me, I was going to challenge myself with whatever passage was assigned in the lectionary for today... Then I read it.... I thought, "Are you kidding me?" I might as well have been asked to preach the sermon in Greek! (Which I'm sure you would have enjoyed just as well!)

A little grace came my way when I learned that the first sermon assigned to me in my preaching class – drawn by lottery, mind you – was this very passage. Cool! This would allow me the chance to deliver it in front of my class and professor, AND get critiqued just the day before standing in this pulpit! I guess there is some grace in that!

Will you pray with me? Prepare our hearts, O LORD, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but yours; that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen.

So, let's go ahead and tackle the two brief, seemingly unrelated teachings contained in this New Testament passage. Ultimately, they are about a call for all of us to recognize our inherent sins – our lives end in death no matter what.

We must repent, yet still there is the paradox that God loves us regardless of our sins and will always give us the opportunity to "turn back" and live fruitful lives in God's kingdom in the here and now.

This is what our Lenten journey is about – dealing with our sins and guilt in a season of repentance, being introspective, leading us toward resurrection and new life.

The reading we heard from Isaiah gives us room for hope and joy – "come to me, and you will have life! I will make a lasting covenant with you and give you the blessings I promised... Turn to the Lord and pray to him, now that he is near. Let the wicked leave their way of life and change their way of thinking. Let them turn to the Lord, our God; he is merciful and quick to forgive" (that is what it means to repent: leave..., change..., turn...).

But sometimes we miss the point – or just don't pay attention at all. Everything *seems* fine – we aren't *that* guilty!

One of my favorite YouTube comedy skits is about a young lady who works at a fast food restaurant – she is very rude to customers who place special orders, in fact, she even calls security to have such bothersome customers removed! Her boss eventually intervenes and reminds her of a chat he had with her before when he told her that she cannot do that! She replies oh-so-innocently, "Oh, is that what you had said?"

Like her feigned innocence, we aren't as guiltless as we might think or act. Things really aren't always as they seem.

Some of Jesus' followers brought up the news about the slaughter of some Galileans in Jerusalem. Jesus immediately asks them if they thought these Galileans suffered this horrible fate because they were worse sinners.

The victimized Galileans had made the pilgrimage to the Temple to observe Passover, and while they were offering their sacrifices, they were brutally slaughtered by Pilate – more likely by Roman soldiers under his command.

We aren't told what the charges are – we just know that the sentence is death and the results are bloody.

The followers are perhaps a little curious about whether the victims may have deserved to die because of their sinfulness. They may have been feeling a bit self-righteous, for they were Galileans too, after all. Jesus answers his own question saying, "No! You are no different – and unless you repent of your own sins, you will end up just as dead." Need we be reminded that we can "perish" without dying a physical death – we can die on the inside and be spiritually dead.

Then, Jesus goes on to remind them of another recent news story; the Tower of Siloam was also within the walls of Jerusalem and had fallen for no stated reason and without warning. Those who died under its collapse were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time – there was nothing they had said or done that put them in that place when the catastrophe occurred.

Jesus adds this other story of misfortune to the conversation to further stress the seriousness and urgency of repentance. Whether intentional or happenstance, all of these victims died in Jerusalem. Now, we might remember, Jesus too, is rejected by Jerusalem and death awaits him in that very same city – and soon.

Jesus says for a second time to the followers, "Nope! You are no different from these victims either – you will suffer no differently unless you confess and repent of your own sins."

Now it was common in the Hebrew Bible for people to equate sinfulness with dire consequences – just think about Job! And here we see that this line of thinking isn't obsolete even in the New Testament. As a matter of fact, we don't hear Jesus affirming or denying if there is a connection. But that isn't his point in this conversation.

We immediately sense paradoxes: between Jesus' teachings of God's love and mercy on the one hand and these fatalities by murder and natural disaster on the other –AND – how way many of us have viewed the God of the Old Testament as vengeful and the God of the New Testament as gracious.

This doesn't seem to be the case here. And this shift in the loving Jesus we grew up knowing in Sunday School who was a healer and an advocate for outcasts, truly tests our faith! But then it is our faith that assures us that at the end of this Lenten journey, Jesus conquers sin and death when he is crucified on a cross – and resurrected from the dead. This doesn't mean we're off the hook until next year when Lent and Easter roll back around!

There is urgency in Jesus' warnings – we are not to wait to repent.

It seems to me that it would be in our best interest to always be repentant, not just during the season of Lent. Jesus teaches us that even the cream-of-the-crop aren't protected from suffering and tragedy.

Bad things do happen to good people. Don't we witness this in our own lives and in the lives of others around us almost every day? Good and godly people suffer terrible tragedies and heartbreak. If our God is in the business of doling out judgment and curses relative to the severity or frequency of our sins, there probably wouldn't be a soul left on earth!

And yet, every human being is going to die – everyone in this sanctuary – every child of God born into this world – no one is exempt from dying. We know this – but we don't know when. In the eyes of God, no one is better or worse than any other because of who they think they are, or where they live, or who their parents are, or the labels given to them.

From dust we came and to dust we will return – period.

I know this sounds like dark stuff and it is. This part of the passage abruptly ends and we move into a seemingly unrelated parable of Jesus. The situation we've seen in Jerusalem was similar to this barren fruit tree – it's unproductive so it may as well be destroyed, right? Jesus has twice said in this passage, if the people fail to repent, then they will perish; compare this to then impending fate of the fig tree in this parable.

One of my heroes in ministry is heavily-tattooed Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, who says this about Jesus' parables:

...[they] tend to be deeply engaging and really frustrating at the same time: you can meditate on them, struggle with them, enter into them, speak of them, but you just cannot solve them. The best way to suck the life out of a parable is by attempting to figure out the so-called moral of the story. [She says] Parables aren't about morals – they are about truth – hidden, unyielding, disruptive truth. The kind of truth that simply can't be contained.¹

In that vein, I'm going to do my best not to assign roles here – who or what represents God, Jesus, the church, us. But we will look for truth.

The winemaker in the parable has had just about enough of this fig tree growing among all the grapevines in his vineyard. In three years it had yet to produce a single fig.

Some of you gardeners out there may be familiar with this phenomenon of a rogue plant that randomly pops up where it seems out of place. I've heard some call them "volunteer" plants. Now, I don't mean to assign a role in this parable, but... I just have point out, fig trees in the Bible are quite often linked with the nation and people of Israel – I'm just saying! But the Israelites surely weren't volunteers – they were chosen – by God.

The winemaker says it is time for this useless tree to be chopped down; the only thing it was doing was sucking the nutrients from the soil that his grapevines could be using.

¹ Sermon: "One More Year for Figs and Manure," delivered March 4, 2013

But then the caretaker intercedes saying, “whoa, wait a minute; let’s not destroy this rogue tree just yet.” He asks to be given a year with the tree so he can give it some intentional care – fertilizing and watering it – so that it could prove itself to be useful. In reality, fig trees really don’t need much care, but this gardener is willing to gamble on this one. If after this time it still is not yielding any figs, he agrees to let it meet its demise. Notice, if you will, the warning of a less-than-desirable fate remains, even with the second chance.

The people of Israel had over the centuries been richly blessed by God’s favor, God’s guidance, and providence. To whom much is given, much is required – the reality is that they were not showing an ounce of usefulness. Worthlessness can be just as destructive as a powerful, raging tornado – it can decimate life as we know it.

You’re probably familiar with the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. It is made up of many distinct parts, each one contributing to the good of the whole. When each part is nurtured properly and is productive, then collectively they produce a beautiful and functional whole – a masterpiece!

The fig tree was barren, seeming to spoil the masterpiece of the vineyard. And though this fig tree was in the midst of grape vines, no one expected it to *produce grapes* – it was only expected to produce what God made it to produce – figs.

Think of it this way: each part of the body of Christ is responsible for its own actions. Each is to share and to shine the light – outward – while serving the whole, not flaunting its own worthiness – although each is worthy. God’s grace does not discriminate.

I think a good analogy of the perceived unworthiness of the fig tree is that of an arm or a leg after being in a cast for a long time. Have you seen this? They become atrophied/skinny, ashy and weak. Why? Because they haven’t been performing their customary tasks for a while – they have been temporarily useless.

Knowing that our God does give us another chance, do we respond by producing spiritual fruit that is pleasing to God? Do we live our lives with usefulness, working towards God’s intended purpose for us, working together as one body to achieve equality for all of God’s children?

In a commentary, the Reverend Emily Heath expresses her thoughts on this passage. She says,

*I do not believe that God wants to destroy us the way the landowner wants to destroy the dormant fig tree. But I do believe that Jesus speaks with urgency because he knows how quickly most of us are destroying ourselves. And I believe God wants better for us than that.*²

God does want better for us. No, things aren’t always as they seem. They can just seem downright unbearable! We feel like we have been dealt a rotten hand and it’s just not fair. People are murdered and natural disasters take people’s lives and their livelihoods randomly. People die entirely too young.

² *The Christian Century*, February 17, 2016, p. 18

We are talking about God's judgment here – even of final judgment.

This is what observing Lent does for us – it teaches us that in the midst of judgment, we have the chance to repent – to change our ways; we have the good news of the gospel – the good news of God's completely unmerited grace.

“Unless you repent, you will all perish like they did.” That is Jesus' no-bones-about-it point, and yet, an intercessor of grace compassionately pleads, “let's give it another chance.” Let God's grace have its way if it may.

[There is a story] of the Australian poet, Victor Daley, being tenderly cared for in a Catholic hospital as he was dying. One of his last acts was to thank the nurses for all their kindness to him. [The nurses' leader said,] “Don't thank us; thank the grace of God.” Very perceptively the poet asked, “But aren't you the grace of God?” (Bultmann, p. 56)³

God's grace is sufficient. God is “ridiculously patient” with us and provides us all what we need to be fruitful, to do our part for the whole body of Christ, giving us second chances – again and again. Yes, some are taken from us way too soon, for no fathomable reason. We simply can't know the time or the place.

I challenge all of us to continually seek God, repent and turn our lives around – NOW, not tomorrow or next week.

May others see in us the grace of God, as we seek economic and social justice for all, walking this journey side-by-side as the body of Christ – proving things aren't always as they seem in this irrational world.

May it be so, for you – and for me.

Amen.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, “Good for Nothing: The Barren Fig Tree,” in *Twelve Parables of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), p. 56