

Repent or Perish: Parable of the Barren Fig Tree  
Luke 13:1-9  
Third Sunday in Lent, Year C March 23, 2025  
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends. Thank you for joining with us on this Third Sunday of Lent. This week we will consider Luke 13:1-9, where we read Jesus' words, "unless you repent you will all perish just as they did" (13:3). Here, Jesus is referring to the execution of some Galileans. He also speaks about eighteen others who were killed when a tower fell on them (13:4-5). From there, Jesus moves on to tell a parable about a barren fig tree (13:6-9).

We learn in 12:54 that Jesus had been talking to a crowd about the end times. According to 13:1, some of those listeners told Jesus, "about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." We are at a bit of a loss to understand what happened. The Jewish historian Josephus includes references to five events that might include the one Luke mentions, but none of them truly matches the information we find here. What seems to have happened is that Governor Pilate mixed the blood of some animals who had been sacrificed as temple offerings with Galileans, who had been killed by the Romans, possibly because they were putting up some form of resistance to the authorities. This mixing of blood would have been a serious violation of the people's ritual practice, not to mention the loss of life.

Notice how Jesus, who himself is a Galilean, responds to this atrocity. Even though it seems clear that the Romans are abusing their power, as they often do, Jesus doesn't comment on the politics of this situation. Nor does he try to comfort any in the crowd who may have lost loved ones and friends. Rather, Jesus only seems to be concerned about sin and repentance, as we've already noted in verse 3. Jesus reminds his listeners that the massacred Galileans did not die because they were somehow greater sinners than others. This point would have been important for folks who believed that suffering is indicative of sin in the life of the sufferer. Beyond that, they would have assumed that the punishment would have been proportionate to the crime. But Jesus makes clear that no, that's not the case. The sins of those who have died were not worse than anyone else's sins. And beyond that, God would be the one to mete out any punishment, not the Roman government.

Before concluding his remarks, Jesus himself brings up the story of eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam, located on Jerusalem's city wall, collapsed. Unlike the example of the execution of Galileans, which was clearly a political act, the failure of the temple just happened. According to Josephus, there was a tower near the pool of Siloam, which was standing on the most ancient part of the city wall. No other descriptions of this collapse are found either in the Bible or in other ancient sources. However, the fall of the tower, along with the massacre of the Galileans, both seemed to be current events that would have been widely known. Again, Jesus doesn't raise issues, such as the stability of the tower, but instead focuses on the need to repent or perish (13:5).

One other point we need to note is that Jesus is not saying that those who have died are without sin. He is simply making clear that those who died have not been worse sinners than those who are still alive. It's clear from verses 3 and 5 that Jesus is concerned with the need to repent. He is also reminding his audience that death can come at any time and in any way. They

could be murdered by the oppressive government, but they could also be in the wrong place at the wrong time when a structure that had been standing for centuries suddenly collapses. And what was true of the people of Jesus' day is also true for us. Any of our lives could be snuffed out by crime, or by a happenstance catastrophe, or illness, or any number of other reasons. Jesus very clearly tells us that we need to repent—change our minds— so that we are right with God.

Without further comment or question from the audience, Jesus launches into a parable to illustrate his point. To begin, let's define a parable. In very simple terms a parable is a story based on a familiar image that Jesus compares to the kingdom of God. The purpose of the parable is not to learn about seeds or wayward sons, but rather is to help us discern what the kingdom of God is all about. As we continue through the Gospel of Luke, we will encounter many other parables, since there are twenty-four in all here, the most of any Gospel. So keep awake and be alert to what Jesus is trying to teach us.

Our lectionary readings have already skipped over several parables, but today we are looking at the parable of the barren fig tree, found in Luke 13:6-9. Jesus begins by telling us that a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He obviously expected it to bear good figs, but that just didn't happen. We know that he is very disappointed in the yield—or lack thereof—of this tree. He's so disappointed that he orders the gardener in the vineyard to cut it down. After all, it's just taking up space where a productive tree could be planted. Furthermore, it's sucking important nutrients out of the ground that a fruitful tree could use. And lest we think the owner is too hasty, notice that he has been coming for three years (13:7), but this tree has yet to produce any edible fruit. He has been patient, but time is up! Well, maybe not. We need to assume that the gardener has been taking good care of the tree. But now (13:8) he wants to give it extra care for one more year. He plans to loosen the soil around the tree and fertilize it. If he can bring it around, great. If he can't, well, he'll cut down this tree that has produced nothing over four years and plant another tree in its space.

Jesus ends the parable here, leaving us in suspense as to whether the tree finally produced good fruit or had to be cut down, even after the gardener gave it extra care.

So now we need to ask what this parable has to do with us. We are not literally trees, of course, but we are called to bear fruit worthy of repentance, as John the Baptist says in Matthew 3:8. Well, what does that really mean? When our lives are transformed by repentance—by turning toward God and away from sin—we will naturally do good works and live as righteous people. Just like a healthy tree, we will produce fruit for the kingdom of God.

Others will be able to see this fruit as we live our daily lives. The nature of this fruit is spelled out in Galatians 5:22-23:

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,  
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

We certainly don't have to guess to figure out what Jesus is asking of us. Nor do we have to ponder how we can show forth this fruit, since the Holy Spirit does that for us. We have talked previously about the fruit of the Spirit, but this season of Lent is an especially appropriate time to talk about fruit-bearing.

Jesus' familiar teaching in chapter 15 of John's Gospel reminds us that our relationship with him can be understood as that of a branch to a vine. Furthermore, we're told in verse 2 that the Father, who is the vinegrower, prunes us so that we may bear more fruit. Abundant fruit-

bearing is only possible if we abide in Jesus. And ways that we can remain in close connection with Jesus include spiritual disciplines, such as worship, prayer, reading our Bibles, and fasting.

Problems come about when we somehow break away from Jesus, when we aren't as closely connected as we need to be to be healthy, fruit-bearing trees. Fortunately, our God is a God of mercy and second chances. We may drift away, but God provides us opportunities to return and be renewed, just as the barren fig tree in the parable was given. Pastor Richard Floyd recounts a captivating story that illustrates this point well. He wrote:

Author T. C. Boyle has an intriguing short story entitled "Chicxulub" (*cheek SHOO loob*). Chicxulub is the name of an enormous asteroid (or perhaps a comet) that collided with the earth sixty-five million years ago on what is now the Yucatan peninsula, leaving an impact crater one hundred and twenty miles across, and twelve miles deep.

Boyle's short story intersperses such episodes of catastrophic natural disasters with a story of one night in the life of one family. The main characters are a husband and wife, parents of a 17-year old daughter named Maddy. They receive a phone call from a hospital: "There's been an accident!"

Apparently Maddy has been hit by a drunk driver while walking home from the Cineplex. They head to the hospital in that dream state of shock that overtakes those in the midst of disaster. At the hospital they are unable to get much information out of the staff. They are told she is in surgery. They wait and wait. Finally a young doctor comes out and speaks to them. He drops his eyes. "I'm sorry," he tells them.

When I (Rev. Floyd) first read the story, I was deeply moved, even though I knew it was a work of fiction. But Boyle was toying with his readers. He was toying with me. Because in the end we learn that Maddy is *not* dead. The dead girl on the gurney is a sixteen year old friend of hers, Kristi, who borrowed Maddy's I.D. to get into an NC-17 movie in the next theater. Maddy gets another chance.

But Boyle has deftly created in fiction that dread state of anxiety we experience when confronted by a sudden and arbitrary shock. There are asteroids out there, he tells us, and there is no rhyme nor reason as to when or where they will strike. And there is nothing we can do about it (end).

How true is this! A tower falls from an ancient wall killing innocent bystanders in the days of Jesus. A ship loses control when its electrical system fails and strikes the Key Bridge not far from here, also killing innocent people who happen to be working on the bridge.

Friends, the reality is that no one knows when tragedy might strike and death might come. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:26: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." I understand this to mean that we are to do our best to be reconciled with someone who has hurt us or who we have hurt. I imagine I'm not the only person who has been angered by something that I thought was unfair, or unjust, perhaps even a sign of betrayal. There are occasional times when I can't sleep because I am boiling mad with someone. As I've gotten older, I've learned that the only person damaged by this behavior is me. So I pray that God will allow me to let go of my anger and repair that ruptured relationship ASAP. Just as God gives us second chances, we need to give others another chance too, insofar as we can safely do that without jeopardizing our own mental or physical health.

We've talked a lot today about a barren fig tree, as if Jesus' parable refers only to fruitless individuals. But let's remember that much of the Bible concerns faith communities—those who gather in the synagogue or church. How does this parable relate to us collectively? As many of you know, when we create our Charge Conference reports, we are asked to give an account of how many folks have been baptized, joined by profession of faith, or transferred from another church. We also need to report the number who have died or left our congregation. Yes, I know; people die and people move away. But I wonder, on balance, how God sees the fruitfulness of each of our churches. Are we making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, as our United Methodist mission statement says we are to be doing? How are we caring for the least, the last, the lost, those who are hungry, homeless, ill, or strangers? In what ways do we show our love for God by loving our neighbors as ourselves? All of these questions can help direct our journey through Lent as we seek to bear more fruit for God's kingdom.

Your challenge for this week is to keep a list of ways that you are bearing fruit. Perhaps you visited a homebound neighbor, or ran errands for someone, or babysat a child, or mowed grass, or volunteered at Overflow Café, or made a contribution to the Cold Weather Shelter or any other mission serving those in need. You may want to refer to the fruit mentioned in Galatians 5 to ask yourself, for example: How did I show love to someone? In what ways did I spread God's joy to others? What action did I take that demonstrated my faithfulness to God? As you review your list, ask yourself if what you've included is "routine" for you, or if you've tried some new things to broaden your outreach and increase the yield of your harvest. Our church orchard can provide bountiful fruit to the honor and glory of God!

Love, Nan