

Lent 3C 2025
Luke 13:1-9
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There is a story that the late Billy Graham used to tell of a time early in his ministry when he arrived in a small town to preach a sermon. Wanting to mail a letter, he asked a young boy where the post office was. When the boy had told him, Dr. Graham thanked him and said, “If you’ll come to the Baptist Church this evening, you can hear me telling everyone how to get to heaven.” The boy replied, “I don’t think I’ll be there . . . you don’t even know your way to the post office!”

I got that joke from my mentor, Dean Markham of Virginia seminary. He goes on to say this about it: “Finding our way to heaven seems daunting, especially led by a guy who can’t find the post office. But the reality remains that while we live on this earth, striving for a godly life, we must always be ready for heaven to come to us.”

I like that. I also like that it brings to memory the ministry of Billy Graham. I remember as a child that even my theologically liberal parents would watch Rev. Graham’s Crusades on television. And we would discuss his sermons afterwards.

Looking back, this causes me to wonder about that seemingly simpler time. Billy Graham was able to do that rare thing we say we long for these days - he was able to straddle the dividing lines so apparent in America.

My parents did not socialize with Southern Baptists, not much. They must have known some Baptists but they also knew they had differing values. There was no animosity. Not that I was aware of. There was a sort of respect of those who were a part of other Christian traditions.

I’m not sure the next generation of the Graham family fared so well. Three of his five children followed in his footsteps in preaching and teaching those same Christian values but I have heard nothing but bad reports about all of them.

I should give them each a listen some time. Because, I really don't know. I just know that I am expected to be suspicious. I am expected to reject and not respect those differences.

Times have changed. We are different now. Our entire culture is different from the way we lived 50 years ago. Many of the same problems exist, but there was just less animosity in the air back then.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus seems different. Usually, and especially in Luke, Jesus is full of kindness and healing and all things pastoral. In the first 12 chapters of Luke, we have been reading about a holistic Jesus who is concerned about the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of all. But here, in Chapter 13, he seems harsh.

The point he is making, however is not that we deserve punishment for our sins. But actually, the opposite. In reference to two tragedies of their time, one a catastrophe when the tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 people and another upset when Pilate pranked their religious rites in a very distasteful way, Jesus says that we are all equally sinners in need of redemption.

Jesus is saying here that there are no honorary sinners. There are no innocent bystanders. We all fall short of the glory of God, and we are all in need of immediate and continual repentance. The state of our hearts and souls is a matter of life and death. Whether at the hand of a vicious ruler, the whim of an unpredictable natural disaster, or the careful attention of a vineyard owner, no one can escape the judgment

Then Jesus shares the story of a man who is disappointed. Three years after he had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, fully expecting that in due time the tree would bear fruit, there were no figs in sight. The use of the phrase "and still I find none" in relation to the figs indicates that this was not the first time he had visited the tree looking for fruit. He had probably visited the tree expectantly many times,

only to be disappointed over and over again. In his frustration he instructs the gardener to cut the tree down.

Of course, the gardener understands the owner's frustration. But, instead of acquiescing unquestioningly to his wishes, he implores the owner to let the tree live for one more year. He, the gardener, will fertilize and tend to it closely for another year. If the tree does not bear fruit at that time, the owner could cut it down.

The gardener begs for mercy and the owner of the garden offers grace.

When we read this parable along with the words and actions of this seemingly overly pious Jesus of this part of Luke's gospel, we are reminded that though our sins render us eligible for harsh punishment, God at work in the world and in our lives extends to us the gift of grace. Like this tree, we are often given multiple opportunities to do better, to be better, or to do the right thing. The same grace that God extends to us we must also extend to one another. We sin. We repent. And by the grace of God, we are given another chance to be the people God is calling us to be.

I was watching the Antiques Roadshow the other day. You remember that show? Maybe you've never seen it but it is easy to still stream episodes.

You remember the set up: A team of art and antique experts travel to cities where people line up from near and far to bring in their treasures to see if they are valuable. It is fun to watch someone bring in some antique from great grandmother which has been in the family for generations and find out it's worth \$50 thousand or more. Often, the history of the piece is more interesting than its value. And often it isn't even all that valuable, perhaps because of chips and scratches, but the show takes it to the next level for sentimental reasons I suppose.

But the metaphor of this treasure measure was suddenly clear to me. No, not that our faith is in storage pushed back to the corners of our storage units

gathering dust. But rather, I see a metaphor of the generational loss of awareness of value.

Often, Granny will push her treasures on the grandchildren and think it is worth more than it is and often the grandchildren have no idea and either way don't want to lug that set of crystal around while they move a lot at a stage of life in which they are still discerning vocation and life partner stuff. Often the item is of no value when Granny passes it down but if hung onto for another generation it's value might go back up.

This happened to me. My cousin got the set of Blue Willow china from our grandmother and I got her sterling flatware set. I was 13. I thought the china was pretty and I had no use for 12 place settings of forks and spoons. I complained to my mother who told me in hushed tones that I got the better deal. I lugged it around for years before I began to enjoy it. I guess I got old enough to have dinner parties or I just got good at polishing silver.

But the new awareness I had this week about the loss of the treasures of our heritage was that we try to change the tenants of our faith in every generation. This is a good thing. But we lose things along the way.

Some want to return to the values of Granny's day, others want to move one into a new Christian era. Others just seem to want to hate each other.

But we have lost a great deal if we cannot even remember the spiritual and social values of the generations who lived and died ahead of us. Even if we disagree.

A couple of decades after Billy Graham's tours started to fade, I was much older and cared much less about such things. That's about the time the trilogy of time travel movies came out called "Back to the Future."

I loved watching Michael J. Fox jump around in time.

But if I must ponder what is learned from the fantasy of going back and forth in time, I must say it is mixed. On the one hand, looking back can offer us new awareness. History is a great teacher. On the other hand, at least the way the movies portray it, people are pretty much the same whenever they lived. And longing for simpler times or times when we were great, as if we are no longer great, these are not good practices.

Letting go of some bad practices is good though. And that is one of the lessons here. We do not need to try to keep score on each others' sinfulness. We are all equally sinners and equally redeemable. If Jesus is harsh here it is just that he really wants us to get the repentance thing.

Jesus is teaching his disciples a new lesson in this story, one about the value of repentance from sin. The disciples were well versed in this topic. They knew right from wrong. They knew what sin is. But they also believed that there was a spectrum about the punishments for their sins.

It was common belief at the time that suffering of any kind was evidence of sin. They believed that people who never get sick or injured or lose money must be saints while people with problems must have those problems because of their sinfulness.

Jesus says, no.

And then he tells a story about grace.

Grace. That lovely, love-filled gift from God which always flows in when we get ourselves confused, overwhelmed or otherwise twisted up. No matter what we do, and no matter when, we are the children of a loving God who always grants us our salvation, not because we deserve it but because we turn back to God, over and over again.

That is the take home message. We know right from wrong. We know we are commanded to repent to God for our sinfulness. We know we are not better than anybody else. And so, we keep working on it. Every day.

We remember what we learned from our elders and sometimes we realize we need to change the rules we make up for ourselves. And we work on offering grace to others.

As for the fig tree? I've always believed she came back too, that next season. She just needed one more chance.

Amen.