

Sermon, March 20, 2022

Luke 13, 2022

“The Barren Fig Tree”

We are in midst of the season of Lent, and so the lectionary brings us to a passage in Luke having to do with repentance. Jesus is talking with a group of people who tell him that Pilate's troops have killed a group of Galileans while they are at worship, and Jesus asks them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” What he seems to be getting at is, do they think they were being punished by God for their sinfulness, particularly because they are more sinful than other Galileans. And he brings up another incident about a tower that had collapsed in Jerusalem, killing 18 people. Were they more sinful than other people in Jerusalem?

Put the question to a contemporary situation. Are those who have died in Ukraine more sinful than those who have not? As Jesus replied to his own question - No! Of course not! The God whom we find revealed in Jesus does not act in that way. He does not kill those who are more sinful than others. In fact, he is not in the business of killing people. And who's to say that those killed by Pilate's men are more sinful than others anyway? In Matthew 5:45, Jesus says of the Father, “...he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” In other words, both the good and the bad that befall us are not initiated by God, and such things really have nothing to do with our degree of sinfulness. As we will see, God's desire for us is not punishment, but repentance.

The other day I saw a posting on Facebook that had to do with the great suffering of the Ukrainian people, and ended with the phrase, “there but for the grace of God go I.” I've always had a problem with that phrase because it seems to suggest that those who suffer are somehow separated from the grace of God! Again, that is not the God I find revealed in Jesus. We have to get away from the idea of a God who inflicts pain and suffering! Pain and suffering are a part of life, and we do not place the blame on God, instead we look to God for the faith, the strength, and the courage to deal with the pain and suffering.

Jesus goes on, as he often does, to tell a parable, that is, a story intended to point our thoughts in a particular direction - and, in this case, for us to consider the true meaning of repentance.

A piece of land, owned by a certain man, has a fig tree that had not borne fruit for three years, which is very unusual for that type of tree. Seeing that it is a waste of the soil he instructs the gardener to cut it down, but the gardener is hesitant to do so and asks the owner to give it one more year. During that time, he will give special attention to the tree, and if it has not borne fruit by then he will cut it down. So how does that apply to the act of repentance?

Well, the word for repentance in biblical Greek literally means to change one's mind or purpose, and to change one's behavior for the better. Keeping that in mind we see that repentance means more than just saying we are sorry for wrong behaviors. It means reversing course, to not continue in the same self-destructive path. So just as the owner gives the gardener time to help the tree to bear fruit, rather than cut it down, God also is not quick to punish us when we do wrong, but in His grace, gives us the opportunity to change, to move our lives in a more positive direction.

Jesus speaks of fruit in a number of places in the gospels. In the 15th chapter of John, he refers to himself as the true vine, and says, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." In the 7th chapter of Matthew, he says that "every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit." And, so, in the parable the tree symbolizes us, and whether we bear good fruit - meaning good behaviors - or bad fruit - meaning bad behaviors - depends upon whether or not we abide in Jesus. To abide in him suggests that we lead lives in accordance with the will of God, revealed in and through Jesus. The fact that the tree is barren, may refer to those who do not abide in Jesus, or act in ways incompatible with the teachings of Jesus.

This suggests that the owner represents God, while the gardener is Jesus, and in Jesus we find the compassion, mercy, and forgiveness of God. Going back to the beginning of the passage we can see that the Galileans killed by Pilate compared to other Galileans, and those who died in the tower compared to other inhabitants of Jerusalem, reminds us of Paul's assertion that we all fall short of the glory of God - that we all have a propensity, from time to time, to bear bad fruit. But unlike the owner who is ready to cut the tree down, God is not inclined to punish us, but in His love, desires that we turn in new directions for our own good.

As Jesus said, he did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. Likewise, when a parent reprimands a child, it is not for the purpose of tearing the child down, but for building the child up by encouraging the child to change behaviors that are more positive and uplifts the child out of love for that child. This is what God wants for us - to uplift us in ways that benefit ourselves as well as all that we encounter along the way! Amen.

Let us pray: Loving God, we praise your holy name, and express our gratitude for the grace you extend to us, and for your Son Jesus through whom your love is revealed. Help us each day to extend that love through the things we do, and the things we say. We also confess that we are sometimes lacking in that way, that we are far from perfect in following your will for us, and we seek the guidance of your Holy Spirit as we try to change and to set new priorities in our lives. We are also grateful for the mercy and forgiveness that we find in your grace. Likewise, help us to also be merciful and forgiving in our relationships with others. May the love we find in Jesus be a guiding light for us as we find our way through this journey called life. Today, we also ask that we might find ways to promote peace on earth, and pray, especially for the people of Ukraine. We pray for an end to the violence and killing. Amen.