**The Third Sunday in Lent**

**Sunday March 20, 2022**

**“Living in God’s Vineyard” (Luke 13:1-9)**

This morning’s Gospel lesson is part of a larger section of teaching within the narrative. Jesus had paused on his journey toward Jerusalem to spend some time teaching his disciples and a large crowd listened in (12:1). He said a lot of things to his disciples, but at one point he turned to the crowd and directly addressed them. His words of reproach criticized their lack of insight into the momentous in-breaking of God’s kingdom that had arrived in him. So, he reprimanded them, saying, “*You know how to interpret the weather signs of the earth and sky, but you don’t know how to interpret the present times*” (12:56). The people in the crowd were able to forecast the weather by reading the signs around them, but they couldn’t perceive the signs of God’s earth-shattering intervention in Christ. A great shift to God’s season was occurring right in front of them, but they were oblivious to it. This should cause us to ask, are we mindful of God’s activity in our midst?

Jesus’ talk of *reading the signs* created quite a buzz among the crowd regarding current events. Some in the crowd attempted to read the signs and began to talk about a very disturbing event that had recently happened. Apparently, a group of Galilean pilgrims were in Jerusalem for a Jewish religious festival and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate had them brutally killed (13:1). It is likely that these Galileans spoke openly of rebellion against the Empire, which posed a security threat that was violently suppressed. Pilate ordered his troops to the Temple and these dissident pilgrims were slaughtered during worship, so their blood flowed along with the blood of the sacrifices. Conversations about this horrible headline naturally gave rise to a theological discussion about it. What explanation could there be for such a terrible massacre?

Popular religious notions at that time likely interpreted this carnage as a form of divine judgment. Most people viewed disaster, suffering, or any catastrophe as a punishment for sin. According to this line of thinking, these Galileans must have sinned terribly to deserve such a fate as this. Jesus directly addressed this faulty idea with a probing question. “*Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?*” he asked, “*Is that why they suffered*?” (13:2). “*Not at all,”* Jesus replied. Then, he shifted the subject of sin to his listeners and challenged them to consider their own spiritual condition before God, saying, “*And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God*” (13:3). This entire conversation reveals the tendency within the human heart to diminish personal wrongdoing by contrasting one’s actions with the more heinous acts done by others. The crowd seemed to be saying, “We’re not as bad as those Galileans who were killed at the Temple. The severity of their deaths must have matched the enormity of their sins.” Jesus confronted their smug piety with a solemn reminder that all people are sinners and need to repent.

Jesus then reinforced his point with another tale of disaster. This catastrophe also occurred in Jerusalem, only this time a tower collapsed and killed eighteen people (13:4). This unexplainable tragedy raised the same questions about sin and judgment, which Jesus directed to his listeners once again, saying, “*I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too*” (13:5). Jesus’ point is clear, people should stop focusing on the sins of others and pay to their own spiritual condition. People cannot be spiritually complacent by comparing themselves to others. *All are called to repentance*.

Before we move on to the next part of the passage, where Jesus tells a parable in order to illustrate his message, it may be helpful to explain what is meant by *repentance.* The core of this word’s meaning implies change and making an about-face turn in one’s life. To repent means to turn from sin and turn to God. Oftentimes, the emphasis is placed upon turning from sin and the essential element of turning to God gets neglected. The Christian life get reduced to one of *sin management* or *behavioral adjustment.* We go through our days and weeks content with our lives as long as we avoid enough of the *wrong* things and do more of the *right* things. That kind of Christianity seems more like a twelve-step program than a transformative way of living. Instead of handing over our whole lives to Christ, we hold onto ourselves and attempt to be good in our own strength. In the words of C.S. Lewis, “We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way – centred on money or pleasure or ambition – and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly” (*Mere Christianity*). Turning to God involves surrendering our entire lives to him and fully embracing what he wishes to do within us.

To drive home his point about the need for everyone to turn to and rely fully on God, Jesus told the story of an unfruitful fig tree (13:6-9). A man planted a fig tree in the fertile soil of his vineyard. He regularly visited the tree looking for figs, but each time there were none. By the third year the tree should have produced figs, so the landowner was supremely disappointed and frustrated by the lack of fruit. So, he decided that this unproductive tree was taking up space and using up too many resources, so he ordered his gardener to chop the tree down. Enough was enough! But the gardener wasn’t ready to give up on the tree just yet. He pleaded with his boss to give the tree a little more time and allow him to give it some care with the hope of increasing its productivity. “*Sir,”* he said, “*Give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer*” (13:8).

The moral of this story is straightforward: *Be fruitful or get chopped down!* Its message reinforces the necessity to turn from sin and to turn to God, yet it provides the added element of God’s patience and longsuffering. Unfruitful trees are given a second chance, an opportunity to become fruitful. Not only that, but they are also given care and fertilizer to help them to grow and produce fruit. The image of a tree and its fruit is a positive one for the Christian life. The tree is rooted and secure, but it is not stagnant; it is always growing, reaching out its branches and striving to produce fruit. In the same way, Christian believers are rooted in Christ, yet they are always putting out new branches and buds. New growth and fruit-bearing should always be happening. The beauty of this image is that it is equally applicable to individuals and to congregations.

The Christian life involves fruit-bearing. We must turn away from the things, such as sin, that hinder new growth and impede our fruitfulness. But we also need to draw closer to and fully rely on God, who is the source of new life, spiritual growth, and fruitfulness. God is at work in his vineyard, but we need to partner with him. God has graciously granted us new life, so what are you and I planning to do with this precious life? Likewise, as the Body of Christ, what are we doing to bear fruit, to bloom where we’ve been planted?

The fig tree parable encourages to think both inwardly and outwardly about the life of our congregation. Inner nourishment is required if we want to produce outward, visible fruit. So, we need to fertilize the people and nurture spiritual growth in everyone. We need to help one another to grow deeper in the life of the Spirit, become more faithful disciples of Jesus, and be more like Christ in our daily lives. This can only happen when we take intentional steps to foster a healthy Christian community that is woven together with love, humility, prayer, forgiveness, reconciliation, trust, compassion, belonging, mutual support, and faith. Jesus said, “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”* (John 13:34-35).

Not only will be spreading fertilizer, we’ll also be pruning away the dead wood of pining for the good old days and holding onto the way that things have always been. God wants to do something new in our midst, are we ready to put forth new, green buds? With our roots deep in the soil of Christ, fed and nourished by God, the sap of the Spirit will begin to flow within us, and green buds will begin to appear, giving us the promise of fruit. A healthy Christian congregation equips disciples for ministry and builds up everyone, but the Body of Christ exists to be sent into the world. Fruit grows outward from the plant into the light. So, too, a healthy church grows outward while still maintaining its deep-rooted connection to Christ. If a congregation is only inwardly focused, the outward signs of life, such as green buds and ripening figs will be hampered. Yet our congregation doesn’t need to debate about whether we should have an inward or an outward focus. It is not an either/or choice, it is a both/and approach to congregational life. Inward nurture and outward ministry are required. Fertilizer and figs go together. There’s a big world out there that needs God’s love. Let’s go forth and bloom in the image of Christ.