

Lent 3C, 2013

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Title: Forgiven Trees

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It's always easier to point out other people's sins. It's always easier to find fault and accuse other people.

It's easy to talk about Barack Obama and the folks in Washington and what a mess they've made of things. It's easy to complain about your neighbor, who doesn't take care of his property like he should. It's easy to complain about those other moms with their out of control kids. It's easy to look down on those other churches and the goofy stuff they do to gain new members. It's easy to talk poorly about those other members of our congregation who are never here on Sundays or who don't volunteer or serve as much as we do.

Zachary's at an age where he likes to tell me when Elizabeth is doing something she shouldn't. If she's touching something she isn't supposed to, or going somewhere she shouldn't be going, Zachary will let me know.

It's easy to point out other people's sins.

This is what the people in the gospel lesson are doing. They are looking for things that other people have done wrong.

First, there were those Galileans whom Pilate had killed when they went to Jerusalem. Surely they had done something to deserve it. Surely they were worse sinners than everyone else.

Then, there were those in Jerusalem who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed. Eighteen people dead. Surely they had done something to displease God. Surely they were to blame in some way for their death. Maybe God was punishing them.

It's easy to worry about someone else. It's harder to look at your own life, to see your own sins and shortcomings, to see where you have failed to keep God's law.

But that's exactly what Jesus tells you to do this Lent.

"Don't worry about the Galileans," says Jesus, "Worry about yourself." "Repent or die." That's Jesus message for you. Don't worry about other people's repentance; they will have to answer for their sins. What do you have to repent of? Where do you need to make changes in your life?

"Don't worry about the people who died when the tower came down," says Jesus, "Worry about yourself." "Unless you repent, you will also die."

There are real consequences to your sin. Sin is a big deal. Not just for all those other sinners out there, not just for all the evil people around you, but for you. You need to repent, or you will die eternally.

These are harsh words. But they're not my words, they are Jesus' words. They are God's words. It's right there in our reading from Ezekiel.

All the prophets were supposed to do was speak God's word to the people and warn them. If the prophet didn't warn them, and the people didn't repent, then he was responsible for that person's soul.

Today God speaks to you through His Word and through the pastors who stand in line of the prophets. When a pastor tells you to repent, it's not because he's being nosy or he likes telling people what to do.

Calling people to repent is not easy, and usually makes people upset and angry. "Who are you to tell me what to do and how to live my life?" It's much easier to tell people that everything is fine, and you don't need to make any changes in your life.

But a pastor who preaches repentance is like a wrong way sign on a highway entrance ramp. You need to pay attention or the results could be deadly.

The point of preaching repentance is so that people actually take God's Word to heart and change their lives. God confronts you with your sin because He loves you and doesn't want you to die. God says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live."

That's what God wants. He wants you turn from your sin. He wants you to live. That's what gives God pleasure- when you repent.

And He's patient about it, too. That's point of Jesus' story about the fig tree. God is patient in waiting for you to repent.

A man had a fig tree that wasn't producing fruit. What would you do if were in that situation? If you were paying good money to water one of your plants, it was taking up space in your garden, but wasn't giving you anything? What would you do with that free-loading fig tree?

Well, after a while, you'd probably dig it up and plant a new one. Get rid of the worthless tree and get one that will actually produce fruit.

And yet the gardener begs the owner of the vineyard not to do this. "Don't cut it down. Give it one more year. I will feed it and water it. I will take care of it. If there's still no fruit after all of that, then we'll cut it down."

The point of the story is obvious. God is the owner of the vineyard, and you are the fig tree. You haven't been producing fruit. You haven't been giving anything back to Him. You've just been taking, taking, taking from the Lord. He's angry with you and ready to get rid of you.

Thankfully for you, the gardener steps in. Jesus intercedes for you. He loves you and doesn't want to see you gotten rid of. He offers to feed you and tend you for another year, in the hopes that you will bear fruit.

When the gardener says, "Leave it alone," this is the Greek word for "forgive." "Forgive this tree, pardon this tree for being such a bad, selfish tree. I will work to make this a fruitful tree once more."

And so who gets the credit for any fruit that comes from the fig tree? Not the tree itself, but the gardener gets the credit. If the tree bears any fruit, it's all because of the gardener's work.

And the same goes for you, too. Any fruit that you bear in your life is because of Jesus' care for you.

Jesus interceded for you, he saved your life; He saved you from being cut down like a dead tree. Jesus still feeds you and tends to you.

And when He is at work in your life, that's when you bear fruit. That's where repentance comes from. Not from you, but from Jesus. The Holy Spirit is at work through His word to change you, to correct you, to get you back on track and bearing fruit once more.

If you refuse to let the gardener take a crack at you, if you try to do it on your own, you'll be a fruitless tree only good to be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

But through Jesus' work in your life, He will make you the fruitful tree He has made you to be.

Don't worry about those other trees in the garden. The gardener's got His eye on them, too. He's got other helpers to tend to them, to prune and to feed them.

Just worry about yourself. Repent when you need to repent, let Jesus tend and care for you, and by His work, and the patience of God the Father, you will bear fruit, too.