

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The Sermon

Why do bad things happen to people; good or bad? Why do brutal dictators kill innocent people? Why does disaster strike down people who seem to be minding their own business? Today’s Gospel reading makes it sound like we haven’t made much progress with these questions. And sometimes it feels like the bad just keeps on happening.

Maybe Jesus knows something we don’t. Explanations and victim-blaming lull us into a false sense of security. We think if we’re better than some, we might avoid their suffering. It just ain’t so.

What CAN we control? What CAN we change?

The scholar and commentator Jeremy Williams echoes what many religious and philosophical traditions prescribe: We can change our minds. Jesus uses the word “repent”. To repent isn’t a one off shift in one opinion about one thing. Repentance involves a total transformation in how we see the world.

Frederick Buchner's take on repentance we used on Ash Wednesday bears repeating. He says repentance is less about looking back and saying I'm sorry and more about looking forward to God's possibilities and saying, "wow".

Jesus' parable of the fig tree nudges us to consider what God might be up to. That might lead to a change in how we see things. And THAT might lead to changes in how we live our lives.

Jesus' grammar leads us beyond an individual and private interpretation of his call to repent. In effect he says his words are for "all, y'all". So as part of a people of faith and as people involved with church where do we see our collective self in the parable?

We might see a bit of ourselves in the gardener or possibly the owner. Are we like humus...not very glamorous, but providing vital nutrients so something else can grow? Maybe we're the tree itself—yet to give a fig.

We can relate to the owner's discouragement: We've put so much effort and time into things...we've tried, tried and tried again...yet nothing seems to change. Now, we're tempted to cut our losses and to write off the church, society or possibly ourselves and just let the chips fall. A line from the Talmud comes to mind and it's heavily paraphrased: We might not be able to fix everything, but we are obligated to try. Isn't that what God calls us to do with the very first creation story—to tend the earth?

So maybe we identify with the gardener who says let's give it another year; after all most fig trees take five years before fruit appears anyway. Sometimes we play the long game. Church consultants used to say that it takes five years before you can tell if a particular ministry or initiative will have a lasting benefit.

What if we're the manure? Credit Professor Rolf Jacobson of Luther Seminary in St. Paul Minn. for that one. He freely jokes around and in this instance it's with intent. There are times we might help others grow, or we give of what we have so others can be fed and thrive.

Maybe we feel both the grace and the urgency of the fig tree. Time, nutrients, water, sunlight, and attention just might bear fruit.

Some of us listened to the parable as part of our mid week Lenten contemplation and conversation. We heard stories about people receiving both food and basic human kindness of being known and greeted by name. We considered how the church reckons how it's growing by looking at lives changed and good happening in the neighbourhood. Some also shared that when someone asks why we do what we do, it's plenty to say "because it's the way we love our neighbour".

Maybe we're just giving a fig, because that's what fig trees do—given enough time, care, and fertilizer. Put another way, when God liberates us and joins us into an odyssey of blessing and saving the world we do what our baptism service says: we learn to trust God, we proclaim Christ in word and action, we care for each other and the world God made, and we work for justice and peace. May it be so with us, and among us.