

We continue in this fall series on the parables of Jesus. I know Pastor Flora will agree that we pour time into each one, and each one as a preacher affects you as you seek to faithfully preach it to yourself first. Each one the Lord uses uniquely in our lives. But I will say that there are some you get to, you plan, you look towards, and then you get into the meat of it and you feel as though you've been punched in the gut. It takes the wind out of you.

And not that this particular text is included among what some commentators called "The Hard Sayings of Jesus," it is nonetheless a hard word. And it is also deceptive in some sense---not deceptive in and of itself, but in the way we understand it. Because it's often easy to hear what Jesus has to say here as if it was a personal note to those who don't believe. But in fact, whether you are a believer or not, the message that Jesus has for us here is meant for each and every one of us.

And so we look at this parable, the parable of the barren fig tree. It comes at the end of a long section where Jesus is teaching and apparently---according to what we know and chapter 12 of Luke---he's speaking to a few thousand who are trying to understand the times. And so they ask Jesus some questions and he seeks to answer them, and in so doing, inviting them---as he invites us this morning---to hear and to respond.

Luke 13:1-9. The parable itself particularly takes up verses 6-9, but the verses 1-5 give the context out of which he teaches. So, Luke 13.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them---do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?

"'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Lord, by the promise of your Son, at the giving of the Holy Spirit you gave us the instruction that the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth, that you would help us to understand, to receive, to apply, the words that you have given. So Lord, we would ask for a fresh giving of your Spirit, this morning, that we might receive this word written for us, that we would respond in trusting you at the deepest of places. And that we would repent as you have instructed. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

As I said, Jesus, in chapter 12 has been going through a section of explaining to them the situation in which they find themselves in. Now this was a large audience. A large part of the audience were those who were really endeared to Jesus, they cared about what he had to say. Some were very speculative, they weren't sure what Jesus was saying, they were speculating on what Jesus was coming to do. There were also those who were absolutely opposed to what Jesus was saying and teaching.

Jesus was teaching on these very issues---as we heard just before---interpreting the times. And what he's suggesting to them is oftentimes---I'm paraphrasing---oftentimes the way you look at the world, you look at it and assume by what you see in the signs that you see that certain things are going to happen. But he wants to wake them up and say, guess what, there's more going on than what you see. And so this teaching gives rise to a question---it's a very natural question---and this question prompts Jesus to not

only answer, but also to then build off of that and include yet another example, and then from that give us this parable.

But it is a call to repentance. I want to make clear, particularly for those of you who proclaim Christ and trust in him as Savior, that so oftentimes when we hear the call to repentance what we tend to think of, is repentance is the front gate in the kingdom. It's what you walk through to get into relationship with Christ. But I believe, as we will see, repentance isn't something that we do back there or once in a while. It's actually intended to be an address that we live in. But it is also for those who don't believe. In other words, the message of repentance is for everyone.

So Jesus, in giving us these stories---let's look together---he warned them of *A False Sense of Security, A Call to Repentance*---verse 5---and then *A Fig Tree*.

*A False Sense of Security*, first, in verses 1 through 4. We have these two stories: one is of Pilate's violence, and then also the falling tower. Let's look at these in turn briefly. What we learn in these verses is that Jesus is challenging his hearers to second-guess what they think are signs of what's going to happen. He challenges them to just look at that and ask questions. And that prompts them to then ask about a story that apparently was well known enough to ask this out in public. Now remember, he has a large audience, much larger---some would speculate three times---than what are present here this morning, if not larger.

And so they ask this question. The question is, *Okay, what about what Pilate did?* And what Pilate apparently did was he had his own henchmen who in some way, shape, or form were either lying in wait or decided to conduct an act of violence on a group of religious adherents. They were Galileans, so these were not Jews, they were Gentiles, and they had their own, you know, religious sacrifices, and apparently [Pilate's men] took their lives. Pilate then had these henchmen take the blood and then he mixed it with his own worship. So we have not only political violence, but religious violence. So their question is in fact somewhat...very contemporary. It's not only contemporary for us now, because of the nature of political and religious violence that goes on throughout the world---even as I speak this morning---but it also stretches back, when you look at when bad things happen to people, when they become victims. And so [it was] as you look back at the book of Job. His friends looked at the situation that Job was in and their answer was, *Clearly, you've done something wrong*. Jesus is here asked the same question: *Are they greater sinners?* Jesus says emphatically, "No." The issue is, victims of violence are not in and of themselves greater sinners because they are victims. But I will tell you, in our own contemporary culture which doesn't like to use the idea of sin, there is still within the American culture---when something bad happens we wonder, *What did they do?* And Jesus says, "No." And he's telling us something very quickly. Be careful not to draw a straight line between your circumstances and your moral standing before God.

He then gives another example. This one is even more interesting in that it involves an accident. This accident was the tower of Siloam. Some commentators believe it perhaps was the tower, perhaps it was some form of scaffolding that was used in building it. It was built on the southeast corner of Jerusalem itself, and formed part of the aqueduct system that aided Jerusalem. And he says eighteen died. Apparently this, too, was a well-known story. So here they were not victims of someone else's violence, they were simply involved in an accident and they lost their lives. Jesus says also, what do we do with those circumstances? He says, were the victims...were those who died...were they greater sinners? No. They are not greater sinners. This is important for us to hear from the lips of Jesus. Because, one: this still swirls around, even within the Christian culture in the United States. Some would even spout the idea that Hurricane Katrina was a judgment on the city of New Orleans. Really? Really. How do we know...this is not an interpretation...this is Jesus saying this.

Or the other side of the equation, what about those who fall victim to accidents? Like one of my favorite bands right now, the lead singer learned how to write music and play guitar as a result of his wife having an accident and becoming a quadriplegic after falling off a horse. They were escaping a hurricane in Florida, and they went to his parents' home in Georgia. They were out riding horses, and the horse came

back without her on it. And so out of that place he began to learn to play music and to sing. But the thing is---I have to wonder---did he have any friends like Job? You see, if we think that this is somehow beyond us, imagine if some of you, perhaps, have had this response: when bad things have happened to you, what you think is, *Well, of course...Just one more bad thing*. Because you see yourself as if you have a magnet inside your body that just attracts bad things. So when they happen, you're like, *well, of course*. And then there are others of you who experience bad, that when the good happens in your life, *Well, it's about time*.

Do you see what is built into both of those responses? The very same seeds of what fed the response of his audience. The person who says *Well, of course*---what you're doing is you're trying to find a straight line between your circumstances and your moral character, your moral standing, before a holy God. And the other side is the case if you believe that it's about time that good things happened to you---inherent in that is the pride of saying, *I deserve it*. So let's be careful at not looking back at the Bible and saying, well that's just ancient talk. That is simply a very contemporary issue. And there are churches today of which I have personally heard the message, that if you are a Christian and are suffering something is deficient about you. And there are others, and perhaps sometimes the same churches that will teach, in fact, that you are a child of the King, therefore, you deserve to live like a child of the King. And that if you're not living in massive blessing something is deficient about your faith. Inherent within that is the same thing that Jesus decries here.

Because what Jesus uses these two circumstances to decry is at the same moment to announce something which is absolutely inescapable about the Scriptures and transcends all circumstances and says the truth about each and every one of us. And Paul says it succinctly: For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When Jesus says to both of these questions---not only is the answer, 'No,' he [also] says---guess what---'Repent or you too shall perish.' The issue is not being able to see behind and have God's understanding of what's going on in the world, whether you are a victim of perpetrated violence or in fact you are a victim of an accident. The issue is not the 'Why.' The issue is the reality that we are sinners before a holy God, [sinners] who have said at our very heart---whether in action, in thought, or in word---I don't want you as my king, I want to be the captain of my own soul. I want to be the king of my own castle. I want to be God. This is precisely the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. And so Jesus says, do not get caught up in such arguments, but hear the invitation. Repent, or you too shall perish.

Okay, we hear that, Lord, but what is repentance? We need to look at this call to repentance and what it is. The first thing I want to say about this call to repentance is, this isn't the first time or the only place in which we find it. This was [one] of the first things that Jesus ever said publicly. John the Baptist, when he says in Matthew chapter 3 when he was looking at the religious leaders of his day who were arguing against what John the Baptist was preaching and prophesying---John the Baptist has this response to the religious leaders---he says, "You brood of vipers..." (Way to make friends, right?) "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And then he says, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." That's John the Baptist saying to those who were the Jewish leaders saying, Do you think your religious background, your religious résumé will get you anything? Your religious practice or attendance? He says, No. So the first message, if you will, of 'repent or perish' goes to those who are the religious.

But then Jesus, too, would add his voice when he would say, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near." This is something that stretches all the way back to the Old Testament, through the mouths of the prophets. Like Isaiah, who says in Isaiah 55, "Let the wicked forsake his way..."---that's another way of saying 'Repent.' "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." This is a theme throughout Scripture, because why? Sin is the transcendent truth and the reality of the brokenness that it has caused before a holy, righteous, just God. And so Jesus gives this call to repentance as a part of the biblical theme of calling out of sin, into salvation.

But then the question is, then what is it? I will acknowledge that there is much confusion about what repentance is. I found a wonderful sustained definition, and then I will build off of that. J.I. Packer in his book Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God writes this: "Repentance means turning from as much as you know of your sin to give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of your God. And as our knowledge grows of these three points, so our practice of repentance has to be enlarged." It is a turning from sin, and by turning from sin the turning involves an acknowledgment---we might use the word confession, but more than confession, it is also taking it in and realizing that sin---and this I need to say loudly to the Christian church---sin is not about the pet set of sins that we find so easy to talk about, that we can all see---sin's outward actions always find their root in inner motivations and the inner nature of the human heart and soul. That is the ecosystem of the sinful actions. The problem first isn't out here. It's on in here. So the turning involves the acknowledgement of that, and that it offends a holy God.

But then it is a turning to the Lord. But before I continue to unpack that for just a moment, I need to talk briefly about what masquerades as repentance. So if repentance is turning from and acknowledging and confession and turning to the work of Christ, then what is it not? First, it is not a vague sense of guilt, nor is it self-loathing. Let me begin with this vague sense of guilt. Some believe that repentance, the acknowledgement, is to somehow we need to work up or to feel guilty about our sin. But I will tell you, feeling guilty about sin isn't repentance, because that kind of guilt doesn't produce joy. Now, how do I get there? Let me explain. If I only feel guilty about my sin, then I'm not able to enjoy and have joy in what Christ has accomplished. Therefore, I begin to resent those who do have joy.

But neither is it self-loathing. There are some who believe that repentance means what I need to do is beat myself up and talk about just how utterly worthless I am, but that, too, is not repentance. Yes, we are worthless to receive the mercy and grace of God, but what it misses is what Christ has done that no longer counts us as worthless, but his children. And then we wallow in a worthlessness or a self-hatred or a self-loathing---that leads to condescension. Because here's what self-loathing...I've seen this in my own life and I've seen this in others---that when I fall into sin, I hate myself for it and here's what I say: I can't believe I did it again. So what I do is I come up with a solution---usually it involves resolutions. I resolve I'm not going to do this this or that. So what I try to do---not that there's anything wrong about resolutions, but this is what happens: I pull my socks up, tie my shoes, and I get resolved to not do it again. And what that leads to is condescension, because I then wonder why you can't do the same. But let me say to you, it is a halfway house to repentance. It isn't real turning. It masquerades as such, but it is not because it neither leads to joy, and it neither leads to a real trusting in Christ.

So therefore, back to what repentance is, and I will give you [that] in this story. This past week Pastor Flora, Robbie Pennington, and I had the wonderful opportunity to be invited as a part of a pastor's luncheon with writer and author, elder, great teacher, loves the Lord---his name is Jerry Bridges. He's written the book---and perhaps many of you who've been around the Christian faith for very long have heard of the book---Transforming Grace---among many others. And so he was asked to give a message to pastors, and so he did. He's now 83 years old. And one of the things he said to us to encourage us from his own life, is how God has had to bring him back as a part of repentance to do what we so often miss when we preach about the gospel. The gospel is what happened on the cross: that Jesus Christ, in view of our sin, came as a substitute, sent by God to die for us in our place to take God's wrath for sin on himself, that we would have forgiveness and salvation. But that is one part of the gospel. He said what we ought to be doing and what he was directing us to do and what he was also instructing us to give to you again and again and again. That is the gospel.

But there's another part of the gospel. It isn't just what happened on the cross, that it belongs to us. It's everything that led up to the cross. It's not Jesus's obedience on the cross that is beautiful only, it is also his obedience for 33 years. What made Jesus worthy to be our substitute? It was his obedience, his active, day by day, moment by moment, choices to obey. Therefore, it isn't just feeling bad about my sin or having a vague sense of guilt and acknowledging, it is also turning---not just to the cross, but to the active obedience of Jesus, that is then therefore declared to be ours by faith. Therefore, when I come to

the Lord and I repent, it is his kindness in Christ that leads me to repentance, because I'm not left in guilt or self-loathing, but I'm turned to Jesus, who is my righteousness. He has obeyed in every way that I could not, have not, and could never. And it is the same for everyone here---offered to you. And it is therefore repentance to turn from an acknowledgment and confession and then to turn to the righteousness of Christ. I put aside not only my disobedience, but also the obedience that I thought merited God's favor. And I turn to Christ, who is my only righteousness. It is only in that process, which is not just once in a while, it's where we live---and as we grow in living in repentance, I learn more of my sin, I learn more of Christ, and I experience more of his grace.

But what does it look like? And if I preach this sermon for any other reason, it's because of this middle point, so I want to stay here for just one moment longer. There is still yet this idea of what then does repentance look like. Paul tells us, and if you have your Bibles with you, let me ask that you turn there, and if you don't I will set it up for you. It comes in a letter to 2 Corinthians. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, and in his writings he has confronted them about sin and sinful patterns that he has seen in their lives, and in so doing, they and some among them were hurt by what Paul said. And it caused them to grieve which was an opportunity for Paul to teach on what [were] the differences between godly grief and worldly grief, because it leads to two different things. Here's what he says. 2 Corinthians 7:9ff. He says: "Yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret..." Do you hear that? There is a sorrow, a grief, because of the presence and reality of sin, but it's a grief that leads to repentance, that leads to freedom and not regret. How do you know you're repenting? if you're still regretting the actions of the past, then you are not resting on Christ. If you are still beating yourself up by that thing that happened last week, you're not resting in Christ. Let me say to you, brothers and sisters in Christ: Jesus does not accuse you, Satan does. Jesus covers your sin and offers you forgiveness. And that is why if you are feeling the pangs of conscience in your heart, one may be that you haven't repented. But if you have, then you need to know that's the accuser saying to you, 'You haven't repented.' And you need to say to him, 'Oh, but it is the righteousness of Christ. Get thee behind me.'

That is the godly sorrow. But there's another sorrow, and he says it's a worldly sorrow. He says, "Worldly sorrow brings death." Why? Because worldly sorrow blames our circumstances for our sin. Worldly sorrow blames other people for our sin. Worldly sorrow finds the blame for sin outside of ourselves, but godly sorrow recognizes the presence of sin in our hearts and leads us to grace after grace after grace because it leads us to Christ.

But what does that look like? Two people: Judas and Peter. I don't know if you've ever thought about the parallel between Judas and Peter, but think about this for just a moment. Both were prophesied to turn against Christ. Judas did so to get financial gain. Peter turned against Christ publicly because he did not want to be counted among those who were followers of Jesus and to suffer the consequences. But notice what happened when they became aware of just the depth of their sin. Judas took his own life. The fruit that is missing is the repentance that belongs as fruit of those who come to Christ. So the owner of the vineyard, the master of the vineyard, looks at the vinedresser and says, 'I've given this tree three years, but it's not producing fruit. Cut it down.' And not because the vinedresser is disagreeing with the master, the vinedresser understands this is what you do in this agricultural culture. But he says, wait a second, I want to give it one more year. Give me an opportunity. I'll till the ground, I'll add fertilizer. I'll take care of it, I'll tend to it. And if after a year it doesn't produce fruit---then fine, let's cut it down. Now some commentators see this and some don't, but I come down on those who do. I believe the vinedresser is Jesus Christ, and I believe the owner of the vineyard is God himself. And I don't see the owner and the vinedresser being out of sorts---I think they understand---this somewhat makes sense, but it is God's patience. The vine dresser says, let me have one more year.

And with this we have both risk and warning. The risk is this: the risk is for the religious, that somehow we believe that repentance is something we did back there or once in a while---that somehow there's anywhere in a person who follows Christ, there's any room at all for us ever to bring anything to him and

say, *See? Here you go. I did it.* It was always his from the beginning to last, and it will never merit his grace.

But then there's also those here who do not believe. The risk is that you believe that this message is not for you, that this is for olden times, that sin is something we talked about last century or the century before that, that whoever really talks about repentance? But my simple challenge is to anyone who does not believe this morning. How in the world do you then explain the brokenness, the death, that we see not only in our lives, but in the world around us. There's only so many labels we can create to try to not use the word, 'sin,' but that is what it is and its effects. It's not the way it's supposed to be.

And because of sin, God has sent his son to tell us the truth, and he tells us the truth to repent, for you, too, shall perish, which means that not only is there for the religious, the irreligious, in fact for all of us--- there is a spectrum of perspective. There are those here this morning who say in their view of sin: It's too small. It's not that big of a deal. It's just a lie. I was just telling him the story---it's not gossip. And there's some of you in here this morning, for whom you have sin that you think is too big. What I want you to hear are the words of our very own confession as a church, The Westminster Confession. Here are these words: As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation, so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent. There is no sin too small and there is no sin too great that is beyond the transforming power of Christ.

And so there's the warning. The warning is, the master of the vineyard is returning. We don't know when. Do not make deals with God that you're going to wait for tomorrow or the next hour or next year---after you've lived a little, to then turn to him. For we do not know the time of his coming, for he will be like a thief in the night. And he will come, and he will gather his children, and he will judge the entire world. And all those who have not repented, who have not turned from and turned to Christ, and turned from sin, and find their hope in him will stand in judgment. Those are not my words. Those are the words of Christ the Savior. I ask you not to wait. If you're a Christian who is struggling with this, I encourage you, I ask you--- and this is a Presbyterian church so maybe you haven't heard this before---come forward. I'm not going to ask you to close your eyes and call for an altar call. I am going to say to you, come and talk to a pastor. If you do not know Christ, come and talk to one of us. We want to tell you of Christ.

Let's pray. Father, I thank you for your goodness and grace, that you tell us the truth about yourself, about us, and about you. And Lord, the intersection of those two can sometimes be a very hard word. But Lord, this word is to us for our salvation. So by your Spirit enable us to live repentance, to find salvation in you. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.