

Repent

Sermon by John Strommen on Luke 13:1-9 March 12, 2017

Larry, the painter, often would thin his paint so it would go further. So when the Church decided to do some deferred maintenance, Larry was able to put in the low bid, and got the job. As always, he thinned his paint way down with paint thinner.

One day while he was up on the scaffolding -- the job almost finished -- he heard a horrendous clap of thunder, and the sky opened.

The downpour washed the thinned paint off the church and knocked Larry off his scaffold and into the puddles of thinned and worthless paint.

Larry knew this was a warning from the Almighty, so he got on his knees and cried: "Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?"

And from the thunder, came a mighty voice: "REPAINT! REPAINT! AND THIN NO MORE!"

What better way to introduce the topic of repentance than with a stupid joke! And while this may seem like a grim topic, it's really not. Repentance means freedom and hope for those of us who look to Christ.

Let's explore this. Our scripture takes place in Jerusalem where people are buzzing about two recent tragedies where many people died – one where a building fell (Tower of Siloam), the other involved state sanctioned murders of Jewish pilgrims by Pontius Pilate. Now it was common at that time to assume that if any calamity befell a person, whether disease or violence or an accident, it was a form of God's judgment. They must have deserved it! And Jesus' listeners were clearly seeking some sort of comfort in the belief that what happened to the people who died wouldn't happen to them – the listeners - because they were better people than the victims.

Don't many people think that way today, too? The other guy's the one who has it coming, because of his beliefs, behavior, ethnicity, whatever. So when the tsunami struck in the Indian Ocean a few years ago, there was a national conversation by some Christians about speculating whether the calamity occurred where it did because those people were Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, not Christians.

That's the trouble with the whole American exceptionalism thing. It puts us above everyone else, as if sin and evil are only "out there" with foreigners.

And do you remember in 2009 when the ELCA held their church wide assembly where as a church body we were deliberating about gay and lesbian weddings and ordinations in the church? During one of their sessions, a tornado struck and damaged the steeple at Central Lutheran Church where the assembly was being held. And why, pray tell, did that happen? Many people thought they had that one all figured out: it was divine retribution for the matters being considered by the assembly.

Those same people better be nervous the next time their home has roof damage in a hailstorm!

Jesus' response to the events of his day? "Do you think these things happened to them because they were worse sinners than anyone else in Jerusalem? They were not. But unless you repent, you will all die just as they did."

Well, at first it was *kind of* comforting that God wasn't singling out anyone with those tragedies. But then it got real *uncomforting*. "Unless you repent, you will all die as they did." What? In a horrible atrocity?? Not exactly a happy thought for the day, Jesus!

Well, I think Jesus was telling us that all of us in this life are in the same boat, it seems. That our ways of dividing up the good and bad don't work so easy.

It reminds me of a scene in the movie *Unforgiven*, The Clint Eastwood masterpiece. The Schofield Kid is a young bounty hunter who has partnered with Clint Eastwood's character, William Munny, a man with a compromised past and demons that keep chasing him. They've teamed up, these two, to exact a bit of frontier justice on some hooligans. In the scene I'm referring to, the Schofield Kid has killed a man for the first time, and he's kind of shook by the whole thing, trying to make sense of it. So as he takes another belt of whiskey, he tries to rationalize his dark deed, and says, "Well, I guess that son of a gun had it comin'."

Munny thinks on this for a moment, takes a swig of whiskey himself, and says, "We all got it comin', kid. We all got in comin'."

Just like Jesus' comment, isn't it? Minus the shot of whiskey, that is. And yes, even Jesus had it coming, as he took upon himself what *we had coming*.

"I tell you," Jesus said, "unless you repent, you will all die just as they did."

Now God certainly didn't make us to be sinners, but we all know when we're honest with ourselves how compromised we are, how out of alignment we are with God's purposes. And that's the point. *We can be honest* with ourselves, because we have a God who wants us to have life and to give life. And to the extent we are compromised on this count, God wants to turn us around. Repent means literally "to turn around," to do a 180. In what ways, do you need to do a 180, or if you like, a 90 or 120?

Today we learn that life points to repentance: the recognition that we all have it coming, but with it, the opportunity to be turned in a different direction and a life-giving one. But...people have been repenting for as long we've been on this planet and the truth is, on our own power, our ability to do a 180 in this life is about like making a new year's resolution. One month is about how long they last. I see it in Lifetime every year. In January, it's really full and you have to wait for machines. But in February, you don't have to wait any more. The New Year's resolutions have been discarded into a scrap heap. If it's up to us to do a 180, forget about it!

Life does point us to repentance, but not as a solo effort, for what is not possible with us *is possible* with the love and forgiveness of a constant gardener.

In our text today, Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree that is not producing fruit. The owner of the vineyard wants to cut it down because it's taking up valuable nutrients without producing anything. Enter the gardener, who pleads for more time to bring forth fruit. He will dig around it and put fertilizer around it, otherwise known as manure, to enrich the nutrients.

Think about it. It's the perfect metaphor for us. What can a fig tree do on its own to start producing fruit? Nothing. Only the gardener can do that – an outside actor who increases the flow of nutrients by tilling and fertilizing the soil around it, making sure it has enough water. And when the fig tree is acted upon in with love and care, it can indeed "turn around" and produce fruit.

We were made to be the kind of fig tree that grows in the rich soil of God's love and blessings in order that we can produce fruit that nourishes and blesses the lives of those around us. Our gardener is Jesus who goes to work bring forth fruit in its life.

We are often rooted in soil that is not nourishing, however. Soil that is shallow or depleted of our broken lives that we place too must trust in.

What is repentance then? It's not so much exerting all kinds of energy turning your life around. It's being fed *in here* by the living presence of the constant gardener who is bringing life to you and *out of you* for others. And it starts by knowing that we are free to admit who we are and what our struggles are, hear the words of forgiveness, and know that we are being made whole from the inside out.

Are you an underachieving fig tree? Probably. So am I. But Jesus is a master gardener. In Phillip Yancey's excellent book on Prayer, he shares a letter from someone who Yancey refers to as Mark, who has read Yancey's books and who is, you might say, a fig tree that is underachieving: a broken soul who has struggled mightily with depression and anxiety among other things. Mark indicates in his letter to Yancey that all the stories in his books about inspiring people only make him feel worse about himself.

Do you ever feel that way? You look at someone next to you who really seems to have it together, who's really bearing fruit in their life, and then you look at yourself in the mirror and say, "I'm just a pretender. He or she is the real deal."

Here's what Mark wrote to Yancey:

I suppose my question is: what is the heavenly reward for those of us who are not laboring in God's fields in the inner city? Or who struggle daily with pornography? Or who at the height of our recovery may have maybe 10 percent of the moral character of the average non-believer? Does one have to be a healthy Christian to receive God's grace?

Now I will quote Yancey's response:

I replied to him that God's grace flows like water, steadily down to the lowest part. Indeed, how could we experience grace at all except through our defects? In Jesus' day, tax collectors, prostitutes, and unclean persons reached out their hands to receive God's grace while religious professionals closed theirs into tight fists. In receiving a free gift, having open hands is the only requirement.

The greatest sin of all is self-righteousness – thinking you are without sin. Therefore, it is a gift to repent and acknowledge your need. As a gardener who spreads manure around to help the fig tree grow, Jesus takes the manure we experience in our lives – the unhealthiness, the pain, the misfortune – and he uses that to help us grow and bear fruit. In the end, repentance is letting the gardener go to work on you. Amen.