

On the heels of Jesus' frustration over people not being able to interpret the present time nor what is just, Jesus is told by some about the tragedy involving a group of Galileans. Jesus asks the question those gathered are probably already thinking, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans" (Luke 13:2)? Maybe Jesus sees that they're beginning to compare themselves with those whose lives ended tragically? Or maybe Jesus sees them beginning to feel a bit safer and better about themselves or wanting him to side with the Galileans- his own people? Regardless of the reasons behind them telling Jesus this tragic story, Jesus doesn't take the bait; he gets straight to the point: First by rejecting the view that equates tragedy with divine punishment with a big "no," and then by quickly redirecting their attention: "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (13:3). Then Jesus offers another example of a tragic story involving a tower collapsing, killing 18 people. Jesus asks the crowd, "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (13:4-5). How many times do we find ourselves asking "Why?" We can't help ourselves; we want to understand or at least operate under the illusion of control and know who to blame when bad things happen. In Jesus' time (and sometimes today), a common assumption "was that those who experienced pain and affliction were being punished by God, either for their own sins or for those of their ancestors" (Daniel G. Deffenbaugh, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 92). This was the same train of thought for Job's friends as well- though it is not true. However, it's human instinct to try and

explain away suffering... to minimize pain so as to make way for blessings...to provide a formula to unlock the mystery and make sense of the senseless. We seem to be the ones who want to pin Jesus down for answers while he is more interested in helping us to ask better questions (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). More on that later. Death is imminent, whether by illness, tragedy or mere old age. Death is coming for us all and yet we still try and protect ourselves with rationalizations, false assurances and just plain bad theology. "Jesus uses these unpredictable, unchangeable incidents to prompt his audience to change what they can- their minds" (Jeremy L. Williams, workingpreacher.org). Jesus' driving concern in this text is **the need for repentance**. Jesus briefly comforts, corrects and then pivots twice, shifting the attention away from the why questions and focusing instead on the need for repentance. Jesus moves the conversation from the "others" to "them/us." It's almost as if Jesus is asking "with an urgency fueled by raw memories of these tragedies, "What about you? How will you live the life you get to live" (Matt Skinner, 2010, www.workingpreacher.org)? When we bombard God with 'why' instead of offering God our hands and feet, our hearts and souls or when we wax eloquent about other people's suffering, but do nothing to alleviate it...I wonder if Jesus thinks that we're losing our life in OUR effort to save it (Thomas).

What does Jesus mean when he talks about repentance here? In the first few chapters of Luke's gospel, John the Baptist introduces Jesus' ministry, and announces a key way in which people can prepare for the

coming kingdom of God- that key way is to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8). John the Baptist challenges that discipleship is demonstrated through actions that evidence true repentance. In today’s story repentance isn’t so much about moral transformation- even though repentance can be that. “Rather, here and in many other places in the Bible, repentance **refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different perspective**” (Matt Skinner). Maybe instead of spending our time comparing ourselves to others and what we may perceive as their sins in the midst of suffering, we have to tend to our own backyard- to the log in our own eye- to our own sinfulness. We need a new way of seeing things- a kingdom way. As Andrea reminded us a few weeks ago, if a tree doesn’t have resources such as its proper nutrients or fertilizer or sun or water, how can it produce fruit? Repentance is the most important resource for us to produce fruit. A change in our hearts and minds shifts what we see and how we show up in the world. It is a new way of living. And what about the perishing part? Is Jesus trying to say that they will die tragically if they don’t repent? No. Jesus speaks to the urgency of time and of God’s judgment (though not through tragedy). None of us are promised tomorrow and tragedies and illness and suffering occur every day. “Jesus doesn’t promise freedom from calamity but urges his listeners against false self-assurances” (Matt Skinner). None of us know when or how we will die. We just know that death will come. And we often live like the saying, “Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow?” What if like those people who tragically died without repenting, there is no tomorrow? “But Jesus says one more thing: death

is not as powerful as we think. Yes, death is coming for us all, but it will not overcome us- if we repent. God's grace blunts death's sharp edge. Repentance acknowledges that God can redeem, restore and make whole" (Eric D. Barreto, *The Christian Century*, p.19).

To illustrate this conviction, Jesus tells a parable- a story about a barren fig tree, a vineyard owner and a gardener. What an odd story to tell, yet, as with all parables, Jesus tells it for a reason. For three years the fig tree that the vineyard owner planted had failed to bear fruit. Tired of wasting good soil real estate, the vineyard owner tells the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener refuses to give up on the fig tree and negotiates with the vineyard owner for a one-year reprieve for the tree- a second chance. With care and fertilizer the gardener hopes that it will bear fruit next year and then the gardener tells the vineyard owner, if it doesn't bear fruit, then it can be cut down (Luke 13:9). The purpose of a fig tree is to produce figs. Our purpose is to produce fruit in God's kingdom, which is an imperative of authentic faith. I recently came across this quote. "It doesn't matter if you can quote the Bible if you live like you've never opened it" (David Alan Campbell). It reminded me of a short poem by Ann Weems called "Witness." *"I am Christian," one once said to me. He said it loudly. I watched and said: "I shall not be"* (*Kneeling in Jerusalem*, p. 57). In other words, if you say you're a Christian, yet you don't live like one, you aren't bearing fruit- you aren't witnessing to who Christ is in the world- you aren't living the kingdom way. "Like Jesus' earlier words in response to the recent tragedies, the parable warns against false reassurance. Just because you have not been cut

down, do not presume that you are bearing fruit” (Matt Skinner, 2010, workingpreacher.org). However, notice that the tree has not been left to its own devices. The gardener buys the tree more time and is open to a different future for this tree, in spite of its present condition. So, what then does it look like to live a life that produces fruit? It’s a responsiveness to our sinfulness- to the pain-that results in a new way of living life inclined toward God. Bearing good fruit looks like offering hospitality to those in need, sitting with a friend who is suffering or not being silent on issues of injustice- just to name a few. It’s not enough just to observe- we must act on our faith as we, with God’s help, set the oppressed free, are sensitive to and have loving action on behalf of those who are outcast, despised, and needy. Repentance is not a trade we make with God; it’s an act of faith.

I agree with a friend of mine from seminary who writes, “I do not believe that God wants to destroy us the way the landowner wants to destroy the dormant fig tree. Yet, I do believe that Jesus speaks with urgency because he knows how quickly most of us are destroying ourselves. And I believe God wants better for us than that” (Emily Heath, *Christian Century*, Feb. 16, 2016). God wants us to have new life, and this life will begin only with repentance- by putting our spiritual houses and backyards- in order- today, not waiting on the proverbial tomorrow. Reflect with me on the following questions: 1. In what ways are you prone to look for waste, loss, and scarcity in the world or for potential and possibility? 2. Where in your life- or in the lives of others- have you prematurely called it quits, saying, ‘There’s no life here worth

cultivating. Cut it down.’ 3. In what ways will you consent to change your mind and heart? 4. Where in your life are you willing to accept Jesus’ invitation to go elbow-deep into the dirt and manure and hold hope for someone or something you cannot control? 5. How might you dare to flourish in a world where you have felt invisible? Wrestling with the deeper questions can lead us to change our hearts and lives now. Without repentance and faithful witness, judgment awaits. Let me be real clear: the urgency here doesn’t come from a fear that God is going to smite us. No. Although “Jesus’ words about judgment and repentance are scary, they depict human life as a gift, albeit a fragile one” (Matt Skinner). This is a time of second chances; a time of opportunity from a patient God; a time to adopt the perspective of who Jesus sees and how he interprets the world. Jesus knows our need to repent, just as he knew it for the crowd in today’s gospel story. **God moves us to repentance- *metanoia***- a complete changing of the mind and heart which leads to a change in conduct. This is the hope offered in Jesus’ parable of the Fig Tree. We may continue to ask, “Jesus, why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world?” And Jesus may answer us with something like, “You are heading in a non-life-giving direction with your why questions. So change the way you see things and go weep with someone who is weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go cultivate beautiful things in this world. This urgency comes from a God who transforms us through grace. Human life is a gift, so let’s not waste any more time. The season has come to bear fruit. Let us take seriously Jesus’ call to repent- beginning today, as “the world cannot afford our barrenness any longer” (Karoline Lewis).

Mary Oliver, a poet who died a few years ago, wrote a poem entitled "The Summer Day." The last several lines of her poem are as follows:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

Amen.