

Repent—and Do It Now!
 Luke 13:1-9
 Richard Baker
 Second Presbyterian Church
 Second @ Six
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The Scripture:

^{NRS} At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or 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? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." ⁶ Then 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. ⁷ So 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?' ⁸ He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The problem with this Jesus guy is that too often—*way* too often—he doesn't say what I want him to say.

Take today's Scripture. Jesus notes two events: (1) Pilate executing an untold number of Galileans, and mingling their blood with their sacrifices and (2) the eighteen people in Jerusalem who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them.

And for each of them Jesus asks pretty much the same question:

Do you think that these Galileans suffered because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?

Do you think that those eighteen in Jerusalem were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem?

Stop there: here's what I want Jesus to say: *"No I tell you—of course not! And while were at it, would you please stop blaming the victim? Would you please stop assuming that people suffer these kinds of persecutions and disasters because of something they did or their ancestors did? Would you please stop believing and insinuating that somehow God must have loved them less because of how they suffered and died? Why don't you instead show a little compassion for those who suffer—and for their families? Have I not shown compassion to those who suffer—to the blind and the lame, the sick and the dying? Have I ever blamed them for their afflictions? And yet verily I tell you the son of man will soon be handed over to the authorities to suffer and to die—will you then blame Him? Will you say that he somehow deserved it? That he sinned? That he lost favor in God's eyes? Perhaps not. And yet will the Son of man find compassion on this earth?"*

Well, that's what I want Jesus to say. And that's what I want Jesus to say, because that's what I think a lot of people—but not me, of course—need to hear. And I'd like to tell them all that myself but I think it would carry more weight—and be a little safer—if Jesus did the job, so I'll let him do it.

The problem of course is that Jesus did not say what I wanted him to say. At least not here.

Now, don't get me wrong. Jesus does show great compassion for those who suffer. Frequently, we are told that Jesus felt compassion for the crowds, the hungry, the blind, the lame, the sick, and the grieving.

And Jesus *did* warn his disciples about blaming the victim. Just look at John 9 where he says the man was born blind *neither* because of his own sin or that of his parents.

And for goodness sake, Jesus' own death should warn us off once and forever from the all-too-easy equation of moral wrongdoing and earthly suffering, the self-serving equation of God's disfavor and hanging on a cross. .

All of that's true. The problem is that Jesus says none of it here.

What does he say? This:

Do you think they were worse sinners?

No I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

In other words, Jesus is saying this:

They—the Galileans whom Pilate killed at the sacrifice, the eighteen who were crushed under the tower in Jerusalem—they died unexpectedly, without even a moment's warning. They died unexpectedly. . . .and unrepentantly.

You too might die unexpectedly—who can predict when someone like Pilate is liable to go berserk or when the next tower is about to fall?

But if death can come unexpectedly at any time, and if sometimes you get absolutely no advance warning before it comes, then there's only one way to prepare: *repent and do it now!*

And if you think I must have this passage wrong, think about the parable of the fig tree that immediately follows:

What's wrong with that fig tree? It hasn't produced fruit for three years.

So what does the man who planted it say? "Cut it down! Why should it waste soil?"

Sometimes, parables can be obscure—but this one?—I don't think so:

We're the fig tree. And unless we produce fruit, the fruit of repentance . . . well, let's just put it this way, God's patience won't last forever. Same point: *Repent and do it now!*

Repent and do it now! That's what Jesus is saying here, whatever I wish he may have said instead.

So what are we to say about this message?

Well, maybe this much:

As hard as it may be to hear, it fits with two of Jesus' most important points:

Point #1

Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand! With those words Jesus begins his earthly ministry, and he never deviates from that message. Yes, of course, Jesus shows great compassion for those with bodily afflictions, and he is concerned about justice, and goodness, and mercy in *this* world. But Jesus foremost concern is with the state of our souls, and their readiness for God's kingdom. Now, of course, this can be—and frequently has been—distorted. Some people, as the old saying goes, live their lives so focused on heaven, that they're no earthly good whatsoever. And that's a mistake. We are told to care about justice in this world, and that what we do with our bodies and our lives here and now really does matter. But as C.S. Lewis put it, there either is a pie-in-the-sky or there isn't. And what we believe on this score really matters. In other words, it really does matter—it makes all the difference in the world in fact—whether we live as if this world is all there is OR if we live for God's kingdom. The philosopher Immanuel Kant put it this way: “If there is no immortality” he said, in other words if the universe really is entirely indifferent to us and how we live, if in the end we and it are just so much cosmic dust, then “we would still be good, but we would do so in despair.” Kant was too optimistic. Oh, he's right on the despair part. But last I checked despair is hardly a basis for sustained, purposeful, clear-sighted *good* action. Oh, goodness may persist for a little while in the face of despair—maybe even for a generation—from habit, fellow-feeling, good example, maybe just from defiance—but in the long run despair wins, and it wins long before the cosmic dust begins to swirl. But Jesus' message is not this kind of bad news, but good news, in fact it is *the* good news: The universe is not indifferent to us, there is a God, a God who made the heaven and the earth, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. There is such a God, and despite all that we've done to shut out and be done with such a God, this God loves us still, and is with us still, here and now, and this God is bringing in God's kingdom, and *that*, and not the cosmic dust, is forever.

Which leads to the second point

2. The way we live here and now matters. The choices we make, the words we say or fail to say, the actions we do or fail to do, the characters we develop or fail to

develop—really do have eternal implications. Our situation is morally urgent, there's no other way to put it. And this is not because we live especially important or even especially difficult lives. It simply comes with the human situation: We can either live for God and God's kingdom OR we can make the mistake of calling this world "our world," and living as if it, and we ourselves, are all that really matters. One way or the other: choose. There's the moral urgency, and that choice underlies every choice we make or every choice we fail to make.

But here's the twist: we're not choosing from a neutral position. We have already turned away from God and God's kingdom. Whether we admit it or not, we are living as if God and God's kingdom don't really matter and aren't even real. This is what it means to be born into sin. And so really, when you think about, there's only one choice:

Go on living lives in sin or *Repent and do it now!*

Jesus, you may have noticed, recommends the latter course.

Repent and do it now!

OK, OK, but wait a minute: exactly how do I repent, how do I live for God's kingdom?

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Repent and do it now!

OK, OK, but but wait a minute: we all know these sayings and know that they are open to interpretation, even dispute. So now what?

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Repent and do it now!

OK, OK, but but wait a minute: I'm not sure I really need to repent, I mean I'm not calling myself perfect, mind you, but I can think of a lot of other people . . . for example, take all those people who blame the victim, who insinuate that people who suffer do so because of something they've done or because God doesn't really love them, what about them? Aren't they the ones that really need to repent?

Then He told a parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³ But the

tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, that tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Repent and do it now!

OK, OK, but but wait a minute . . . I don't think I can.

And here at long last, after all my stalling, equivocation, and defensive self-righteousness, we hit the truth. How can I, already turned in the wrong direction—how can I, all by myself, turn myself around?

And the answer to that question is right in the parable of the fig tree.

The answer is that I am not all by myself. And we are not all by ourselves. Think again of the parable: Do you remember who pleaded for the fig tree, who, in other words, pleaded for us? Who was it that pleaded that we might have a second no, make that a third, no, really make that a fourth chance?

It was the gardener. It was the gardener who said:

"Give it one more year. Let *me* dig around it. Let *me* fertilize it."

Our repentance is not solely, or even primarily, our work. It is NOT a dramatic self-willed uprooting of our own lives. No, it is first the work of the gardener who seeks to bring forth the fruit that is somehow, somewhere—or so the gardener believes and we must remember that he sees better than we do—latent in us.

We were meant for God's kingdom, just as the arms of the tree were meant for sunlight. And we were meant to bear the fruit of that kingdom in season—and that means here and now—just as the arms of the fruit tree were meant to bear its fruit in season.

And it is the gardener who makes this happen.

And Jesus said to them:

You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

It is the gardener who loves us, who laid down his life for us, who feeds us to this day, who brings us up so that we may live and bear fruit for his kingdom and his glory.

Trust the gardener. Give your lives to him. Be fed by him (The Lord's Supper). Abide in his love.

In other words, and I know this may not sound like "in other words" but it really is:
Repent.

But remember: we have already been too long fruitless, and although God's kingdom is forever, his patience is not! Remember those Galileans whom Pilate killed, the eighteen who were crushed under the tower.

So repent—and do it now!

God, be merciful to me, a sinner!

Amen.