

TOUGH LOVE

Rev. John Annable, University Baptist Church

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LUKE 13:1-9

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 that 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 growing 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 more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'

This passage from Luke gives us some very interesting things to think about. It may appear that Luke is introducing us to the topic of bad things happening to good people or perhaps the matter of convincing God to postpone judgment.

But it is not hard to come to the conclusion that we are looking at a Lenten theme which is repent. As we often say when we put the ashes on the foreheads of participants in an Ash Wednesday service: *"Repent and believe in the gospel."* This is the plea of our Lord. Last Sunday we indicated that repentance leads to change and all of us can change. However, repenting without changing is not repentance at all.

Today's lesson says that there were some present who tell some interesting stories about some people who were slaughtered by Pilate and some who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. These are interesting subjects but why all of sudden would Luke bring up these subjects?

If we read the passage that goes before we might understand it better. In the twelfth chapter, if we read the verses that go right before our lesson for today, we begin to get some context, that now is the time to repent and how important it is to deal with the matters of repentance before it is too late: Those verses read:

54 He also said to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so, it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 56 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

(Settling with Your Opponent)

57 "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? 58 Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case,ⁱ or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. 59 I tell you; you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."

In other words, when talk about the Galileans killed and the eighteen killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them he is not saying that they these victims sin was any different than the sin of those who are putting the question to them. This seems to be one of places that led the Apostle Paul to say *"all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"* and it is time to repent before anything should befall them. If they do not repent that will die in their sins the same as those killed tragically.

There are many who preach about the need to change because Christ might come just *"like he said he would."* But they don't seem to pick up on the idea that Jesus says it is not up to us to know the time of Christ appearing. It is up to us to repent and live the gospel so we will know that we have life abundant in

this age. That should be our focus.

He says to the vinedresser. I keep coming, and yet every time I come I still do not see the fruit you are supposed to see on the vines. He said it is time to cut them down. The vinedresser pleads for one more year so he can dig around the vines, fertilize them and then, if they do not bear fruit they can then be cut down.

Like so many of Jesus' parables, this one also leaves me wondering about how things turned out. I would like to know if another year was given

But, to those who wish to have idle discussions about other people's pain, Jesus will have nothing of it. He calls for repentance. Rather than speculate about the sin of tyrants like Pilate, we are to turn the question back upon ourselves. In the time that God has given us, of what do we need to repent?

Now all of this presents a real challenge. In the contemporary church we have succeeded in sentimentalizing Jesus to the point where we have taken the romantic "*gentle Jesus meek and mild*" of the 19th century, and reworked him into Jesus our good friend, our buddy, our therapist who always affirms and never criticizes, always blesses, and never curses. And yet today's gospel presents us with an unsettling, judgmental Jesus.

This is the only place in the Gospels where Pontius Pilate, the executioner of Jesus appears prior to Jesus' death. This is the only time, before Pilate appears in the Passion of Jesus, that Pilate says or does anything.

We know from biblical historians that Pontius Pilate could be an efficient and brutal enforcer of Roman law and order against these occupied Jews. Luke does not tell us why Pontius Pilate murdered these Galileans. We hear nothing about this massacre in other ancient sources, probably because killings of this sort were so commonplace. That's the way Pilate managed these Jews. When you're a foreign army, occupying somebody else's country, even though you may not want to be brutal it is terribly hard to be an enforcer of occupation values, without resorting to grave violence against the occupied.

So, Jesus is told of Pilate's horrible action against the poor Galileans who were just trying to worship God up at the temple. Surely Jesus knew all about Pilate and his terrible history already. Then, as now, when there is some great tragedy, some great disaster, people talk. People try to figure out what happened and what to make out of it.

And one reason we talk is to try to make sense out of such tragedy, then, as now. "*Jesus, did you hear about what Pilate did to those Galileans at the temple?*"

And while we talk about these tragedies, usually we have a question in the back of our mind: "*I wonder what those people did to deserve this.*" Immediately after that fateful morning on September 11, 2001, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Centre in the United States, commentators immediately went into action trying to ascribe blame, trying to figure out "*what did we do to deserve this?*"

Elsewhere in the Gospel of John the disciples of Jesus encounter a blind man and ask Jesus, "*Who sinned? Do you think his parents sinned or did he sin in order to be born in this condition?*"

Jesus is not drawn into a discussion with his disciples about who sinned, or who caused this tragedy. Rather, he throws the whole question back in their laps.

"*I tell you, unless you repent, you shall also be under judgment.*" A whole generation stands before the judgment of God. Judgment looms over this story. The Pharisees are depicted as collaborating with the Romans in order to get Jesus out of the way, lest they provoke the Romans in any way to come down on their heads with their power. Ironically, just a few years later, despite all efforts to keep the Romans at bay, the Romans brutally come down on the heads of all Jerusalem, destroying the city, laying waste the temple, and devastating the people.

Jesus' words are as harsh as those of John the Baptist who began this Gospel of Luke. John began

Luke's Gospel by screaming in sermons, *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to try to flee from the wrath to come? You better repent, for a day of judgment is coming."*

That's a tough sermon. And here, Jesus is not a sweet, sentimental savior, but rather, a fierce proclaimer of judgment. We want to talk about the abuse of power by evil people like Pilate; Jesus reminds us that we are also powerful people who, like Pilate, abuse and misuse the power that we have been given by God. Who are we, in our sin, to stand in judgment on Pilate?

On this Third Sunday in Lent, we may want to have a pleasant, detached discussion about the suffering of the world, preferably our suffering, to have pleasant theological discussions about spiritual matters and point the finger of judgment at some scoundrel like Pilate. But Jesus won't let us. He wants to talk about judgment, our judgment. We come in here wanting to judge Jesus, wanting to make a verdict upon his way — does it make sense, is it practical? Is it an adequate answer to the deep questions that life puts before us? And so on. And then he questions us, pronounces a verdict upon us. You must repent. Repentance means that you must let go of your devices, and cling only to God.

Pilate thought he was judging Jesus. But before the end of the story, on the cross, Jesus is revealed to be the judge of Pilate.

And this day he judges us by using the art of tough love.

Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem. That is the story immediately before this one. He is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. And on his way, he puts before us a question, *"Will you turn, repent, change direction in your life and walk with me? Will you go the way I am going?"*

He has said, *"If anyone would follow after me, walk with me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow. For whoever will save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake, that person will be saved."*

Jesus does not say specifically what we need to repent of or turn from in order for us to change. Maybe he doesn't say specifically because that's a question between each of us and God. Perhaps the answer for each of us is different. And so, we are reminded that Jesus not only did some tough things, and suffered some tough things, but he also said some tough things. And today he says them to us.

Let us confess our sin — all those things that keep us from wholeheartedly following the way of Christ — and then let us ask him to help us to turn, to repent, and to follow.

"Why did you do what you did?" We are likely to respond, *"Who are you to judge me? You can't possibly understand what I did unless you are me."*

In today's scripture, Jesus speaks of repentance, of our guilt before the judgment of God.

I believe that the reason you are in church today is because you needed to hear this message again. Because you and I both know that right now there are other changes we need to make that we've been putting off. How many more SECOND CHANCES do we have left? When are you going to do something about it?

Are you going to change your ways as of today?

The time to say "I love you" is now.

The time to say, "I'm sorry," is now.

The time to say "I forgive you" is now.

The time to say "I need you" is now.

The time to do that thing you have always wanted to do, always meant to do, know you ought to do, is now. Jesus is talking about tough love.

There was a story told in our Lenten bible study. It was in the context of Lent, of course. In an introductory chapter on the subject of bad things to give up for Lent he suggested the possibility of giving up bitterness because, often, time runs out on many things when we hang on to bitterness.

He told about a hit movie, *The Rain Man*, of 1988; the story of a young man named Charlie Babbitt who became estranged from his father because of a confrontation that happened when Charlie was sixteen. Charlie brought home a good report card and wanted to take some of his buddies for a victory ride in his father's prized convertible. But his father said, "No!" Well, Charlie took the car anyway. His father had him arrested along with his buddies for stealing the car! The parents of the other boys bailed them out of jail immediately, but to teach him a lesson, his father left him in there for two days. When Charlie got out of jail, he was so angry, so hurt, so hostile that he ran away from home.

Later his father tried to contact him; but Charlie was bitter and refused to respond. Finally, when his father died he went back home to find that his father had left to him the convertible—the car that had caused all the trouble. But the rest of his estate, about three million dollars, went to his autistic brother Raymond that he did not know he had.

That makes Charlie's even more angry. He left his birthright to a brother who did not know the value of money. Charlie assumed that Raymond would think that candy bar or a fancy sports car costed about the same...about a hundred dollars.

As the plot unfolds Charlie takes Raymond from the institution he is in and runs away with him to use as ransom to get the executor of the estate to give Charlie the money. In the process of being with his brother he finds that he really cares a lot for Raymond. The movie does not show us a happy ever after ending, only showing Charlie leaving Raymond back at his institutional home and promising to be back every two weeks to visit.

But the time to change had come before Charlie would give up his bitterness. His days were wasted while being bitter the time for Charlie and his father to reconcile was gone. Raymond and Charlie had missed out on something that might have helped transform them all.

This is only one of many examples of how important time is.

If you are just trying to repent in time to get to heaven you will find you have already failed the test on how to get to heaven

There are many ways for us to look at the matter of Jesus as a judge. He is the one who looks at us and judges our lives. But how does this work?

One of my favorite ways at defining who Jesus is by using the word teacher.

We have all been in a class at one time or another. The teacher teaches us the lessons, illustrates the lessons, and then there comes the time when the teacher then gives an exam to see how well we have learned the lessons. We take the test, we turn in the test, and the teacher grades the paper. In other words, the teacher judges how well we have been able to learn the lessons. We get a D rather than the A or at least the A- that we were sure we really deserved. Beside the grade the teacher writes the words, "*I know you and I know you can do better than this.*"

Most of the time it is not the teacher's fault you did not get subject matter, although that is the case sometimes. It is possible the teacher was not an adequate teacher for the task. Most often is that have not listened or understood well enough and did not tell anyone we did not understand.

How many times did Jesus teach His disciples and yet it seemed as he got closer to the time when he would be crucified, rise again, only to ascend into heaven, it broke his heart that they did not grasp what the Kingdom lesson was all about.

Because of this he wept.

He said if we want to follow him we would have to take up our own cross, pay attention to what he taught us and then live out those lessons. Could it be we understood but wanted a different way, an easier one. And in doing so we have sinned and he says we need to be careful lest we run out of time to repent and miss out on abundant living today.

