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Luke 13:1-9
Third Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus expounds on the question of the Galileans, “Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I don't know of another situation in our three year-series of readings in which one week's reading comes immediately *prior to* the previous week's readings. Usually they go through the gospel 'in sequence', but last week we had Luke 13:31-35, this morning Luke 13:1-9. Why not just take them in Luke's chronological order? The answer must be thematic.

Last week, recall, the call was to repent and not miss out on the feast with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets, but to take comfort and rejoice in it because of Jesus' desire and intent is more beneficial for you than is your desire and intent for yourself. This morning, we hear the same theme again, but – in a sense – furthered by the inclusion of the fruits of repentance. So, in this season of repentance, let's further our meditation upon it.

First, in our text, let's deal with these poor souls who knew horrific and untimely deaths. Notice, our text includes another one

of those context phrases we heard of last week – “at that very time.” What was Jesus saying “at that very time” that would have prompted the crowds to bring up the Galileans? In the words immediately prior to this text, Jesus speaks of noticing and carefully interpreting the signs of “this critical time” (12:56) and thereby repenting for one’s own good.

Perhaps the crowds thought the heinous massacre of the Galileans was such a sign; they mention it to Jesus, but he – reading their hearts – knows that they assume the ‘correct interpretation’ is that the Galileans were somehow deserving of being punished by God, their own blood being mingled with their (apparently unworthy) sacrifices when Pilate slaughtered them in the temple courtyards (by the way, anyone who – when contemplating the death of Christ – wants to paint Pontius Pilate as a sympathetic timid pushover who lost out to the crowds needs to re-read this text). What a brutal massacre – slaughtered while worshipping! – that, the crowds wonder, must be the angry judgment of God upon those Galileans (“Perhaps they weren’t worshipping rightly!”). ‘So, Jesus, what do you say of these Galileans!’

Jesus responds, “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?” Sometimes, that’s the logic we use, isn’t it? If we know someone languishing in a hospital bed, “Oh, God must be punishing them. They must be real sinners.” If we hear of a tragic plane crash,

or car accident, or yet another homicide in Chicago, we immediately speak of the godlessness of it all, that God must have been punishing those who ‘deserved it,’ forgetting that there might have been Christians on that plane, in that car, or in the most dangerous neighborhoods of Chicago, praying each night, “If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Indeed, how difficult it can be to encourage folks to reach out with the Gospel into the slums of the city’s South Side or into the changing neighborhoods of Elgin because it’s easy to reason that “There can be no faith here; God must be absent from this situation... and he’s only absent where He’s punishing!” And, what’s worse, is that such thinly-veiled comments claim there are certain people more worthy of judgment than others... namely, more worthy than “me.”

Now, to expose such veiled judgmentalism, Jesus gives another example, not of the Galileans – considered ‘lower class Jews’ – but of those Jews in Jerusalem (the tower of Siloam that fell was in Jerusalem). And Jesus says of that situation, “Were they worse offenders than all the others who live in Jerusalem? No.”

But Jesus’ main point isn’t to defend the eighth commandment and the reputation of their souls, is it? His main point is to point out the self-righteous grading of one sinner versus another, to point right back at the self-righteousness of his hearers (and that can include us, can’t it? We compare sinner vs sinner, Galilean vs. Jerusalem Jew, Lutheran vs. Roman Catholic vs.

Protestant – as if our ‘status’ makes us more deserving of heaven) and to say, “If you think people die because of their sins, then *you* better repent as well.” Now, that’s a tough one to hear. And we have to hear it rightly; though it is wrong to say that the things by which we try to read/interpret God’s judgment (a tragic event) are necessarily God’s hand of judgment, the truth is we think of it that way because we know that God’s judgment will end in death – not just temporal, but eternal. So, why worry about trying to figure out His will in those situations, why try to claim their situations are more worthy of repentance than *your* life’s situations, when Jesus has made clear His intent in every situation: “I tell you... unless you repent, you will all perish.”

But, repenting isn’t just a theoretical head knowledge; it’s not simply a nod of the head, and it’s certainly not the ability to shed an insincere tear on demand. To repent is to turn around from your self-desires (remember last week, your sinful desires, with your intents and plans to achieve those sinful desires?)... repent and turn from those and rejoice in Christ’s desires, and his intents and plans to achieve those perfect desires for you. That’s repentance – to depend upon him.

So then, to put further illustration on this, Jesus tells a parable: a vineyard owner plants a new tree in his vineyard, and – after a while – he comes to see if it has borne fruit. The explanation is simple: God is the vineyard owner. By the work of the Holy Spirit,

he has planted you in the vineyard that is His Church. What a divine reputation is yours! You are the Church wherever you go in daily life, and so, throughout all of daily life, the Lord expects the fruit is borne that will show that you are a healthy tree – whether a young sapling or a mature tree that has seen seasons come and go – either way, you always live life as the Church, and God expects you will live it accordingly.

In this example, the vineyard owner says to the vinedresser (in other words, you can imagine the Father saying to the Son), “Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this particular fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down!”

Is this an unfair assessment? Isn't this exactly what John the Baptist predicted when he said, “Repent, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance!” If one calls himself a Christian, but – for three years – lives and practices life and carries himself without bearing any fruit in keeping with repentance, how is he to be considered a Christian? Being a Christian is not about your status before God by depending on *yourself*, but your standing before God in *Christ*; and that standing in Jesus, that faith in *Him*, includes repenting and despairing of yourself and desiring to live by Christ's will for you. But the one who *desires* (from last week, *θελω*) his own will and ways is obstinate to that call to repentance and to turning around and seeing Jesus and the gracious eternal life that is given the sinner because of Jesus.

Now, in our text, it's Jesus who intervenes. The vinedresser says, "Sir, give me one year. Father, I will tend to it; I will roll up my sleeves and care for this fledgling tree; I will dig around it; I will sustain it and do all that I can do to make it bear fruit; I will water it and nurture it and feed it Word and Sacraments. Then, if it bears no fruit in a year, cut it down."

Notice the long and short of the vinedresser's comment: if Jesus can't sanctify you, no one can. *You* can't. Your *friends* can't. Your *loved ones* can't. Certainly, none of the false gods can, because – as much as you could appeal to Allah and the Mormon god and Hindu gods and all the others – they're still false, pretend, and deaf to your cries. And what of appealing to those around you? All your neighbors can do for you is point you to *Christ*. All *you* can do for *yourself* is despair of yourself and hope in *Christ* – that he who has promised to sustain you is faithful.

And *he is...* he puts his own reputation and effort on the line and says, "I will do everything possible to produce fruit in this little tree." But, if he is going to work on you and be your servant, then you cannot serve yourself. It's like those ER physicians and surgeons and nurses who will do everything humanly possible to keep you alive, but that means you've got to stop resisting and pulling the mask off. If they tell you to *do* something, it's for your own good. If they tell you to *not* do something, it's for your own good.

Same with the Lord, your vinedresser. Where he calls you to repentance, it's for your own good – repent. For those who do not repent will obstruct the work the divine surgeon or physician is trying to do, and they'll perish.

Learn from the history of Israel, those 'people of God' whose obstinance and self-righteousness got in the way of the gracious service of the Lord. Consider the 5th chapter of Isaiah, when – in that prophecy – the prophet (remember how the prophets were hated by Jerusalem as they were sent to it)... the prophet foreshadows these words of Jesus and points out that the vinedresser's work necessarily depends upon the call to repentance. From that prophecy, the prophet speaks of the impenitent this way:

“My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I shall tell you what I will do to my vineyard (declares the Lord). I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

Learn the lesson, for Jesus says in our text, “Unless you repent, you will likewise perish.” Yes, the holy Lord would rather destroy the vineyard – has no choice but to destroy the vineyard – rather than let

wild grapes and sin-plagued growth overtake his Church. He would rather cut down the tree than have a dead tree take up space in his vineyard.

But that doesn't mean the Lord *delights* in such things. The call to repentance is not the call coming from a cynical and impatient God, but a loving and long-suffering God. In our Old Testament reading the Lord declares, "As I live, declares the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?"

But, that begs the question: How can that which is dead, rotted to the core, choose to live? It can't happen.

Return to the gospel reading, where Christ's parable clarifies our hope for us. The vinedresser says to the vineyard's owner, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure."

It may be quite an *earthy* description of God's holy means of grace, but that use of the word "manure" *does* match quite well the patient diligence with which Christ humbly serves us. He does not serve us in the high and holy, but in the plain and lowly. He does not tend to our spiritual health by using the most *sparkling jewels* of earth, but rather gets his hands dirty in the use of the *plainest*, but *richest*, means of earth. He uses the means of the vinedresser, the farmer, and the harvester: In Baptism: plain water; In the Supper: bread and wine.

And, yet, connected to and combined with God's Word, these plain, lowly, earthly means become heaven's greatest treasures and the mysteries of God for the benefit of His people.

And, through these means – tilled and worked by the sweat and blood and sacrifice of the vinedresser himself – the vineyard owner looks upon His vineyard with great joy, for the empty branches of death give way to the fruit-filled vines of new life.

Yes, good fruit is borne by the vineyard... “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” But such does not earn your salvation, but flows and grows from it. (Good fruit does not make for a good tree, but a good tree produces good fruit.) Christ who has redeemed you with his death now sanctifies you with *his life*. As St. Paul says “we are ... created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Yes, those fruits worthy of repentance, those good fruits that overcome our sinful desires and are in keeping with Christ's desire, they will grow from the vine... a product of Christ's digging and feeding and nurturing our once-rotten souls.

Jesus' combined images of last Sunday and today paint a rather good picture of us stubborn sinners, don't they? Stop running from the mother hen, stop refusing the protection of Christ's arms outstretched upon the cross; instead, in fear and trembling at the deserved fate of your fruitless fig tree, repent. Despair of yourselves and repent. And know that – on account of Christ – He who laid his reputation on the line and died the death intended for you and now

tirelessly tends to and cares for you... on account of and in this Christ, you will be saved from the fate of the wicked and the way of those who are perishing.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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