

C Lent 3 3.24.19

Luke 13:1-9

Focus Statement: Jesus is tending the soil of repentance

A rewriting of the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of Luke for March 24th, 2019:

“At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Muslims in New Zealand, who had been killed in their mosques during Friday prayer. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Muslims suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other New Zealanders? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or the twenty-six transgender people who were killed in hate crimes in 2018—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in America? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or the people of Mozambique affected by the cyclone or those in Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, Kansas, or elsewhere whose homes were destroyed by flooding, do you think they were worse sinners? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.’”

Friends, it has yet again been a heavy news week, month, year. Hate crimes are on the rise across all different groups, natural disasters continue to wreck havoc, and the political cycle is just beginning to kick up again, offering a lot of talk and very little action. And the question all too often becomes, whose fault is this? Who’s to blame that these tragedies occurred? Who missed the signs, who failed to intervene? Who is the offender that permitted this atrocity? Who sinned?

We’re not new in asking these questions, the desire to assign guilt or blame is not unique to our time. But it’s also the wrong question, because it’s an unanswerable question.

Theodicy, the problem of evil, is impossibly complex. There are layers upon layers of failings, mistakes, greed, power, pride, guilt, in any one of the tragedies I listed above that there is no way to narrow it down to a single guilty party. And to blame the whole thing on God's Divine Hand, I'm sorry friends, but I refuse to buy it. Claiming God's Plan is a cop-out allowing us to wash our hands of our own complicity.

And so when Jesus was approached by those who asked the same questions of tragedies in their own time, he was quick to respond, "no, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." [Pause] "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Ouch. Those are harsh words from Jesus. Words of judgment. Repent or perish. Now, in fairness, there are plenty of churches out there who are all in on that message. And those churches buy a lot of billboards. But we're Lutheran, so how do we read this text? Well friends, I'm not going to be soft with you, this text is Law. Which means it's that hard good news that's going to hurt before it heals. But it will heal, because alongside Law always comes Grace. Let's dig in.

"Repent", *metanoia* in the Greek literally means turn around, go in a different direction. So repentance is NOT about moral uprightness, it is not about some code of beliefs and behaviors that need to be ascribed to in order to live in the so-called "right" way. No, repentance is a radical reorientation of our lives. It is a new form of seeing, a new perspective, a new way of being in the world. Such a dramatic change will inevitably have moral implications, it will mean that our actions inevitably change, but that is the effect of repentance, not the cause. This is Luther's Freedom of a Christian. As Christians we are

called to serve, not as a way to earn God's forgiveness, but as a response to that forgiveness. We serve not so God will love us, but because once we know God loves us, what else could we possibly do but love others.

What this means, dear people of God, is that repentance is larger than feeling sorry for our own individual sins. Dr. Ronald Allen defines biblical repentance as "individuals and communities turning away from things that violate God's purposes (such as idolatry, injustice, and exploitation) and turning towards faithful living centered in worship of the most-high God and in the practice of justice, mutual commitment, and other values of living in covenant."

As individuals and as a community, we certainly have plenty of things for which we need repent. Our silence in the face of injustice, instead of calling a thing a thing and doing something about it. Our desire to make excuses and find others to blame instead of addressing the real issues that create the sort of climate where mass shootings are no longer if, but when. Our turning inward, afraid of the world around us, a world we forget that God has already saved. Our tendency to create regulations for whom this salvation was truly for. Our complicity, our complacency, our explanations and enabling. That long long long list of things for which we asked for God's mercy on Ash Wednesday. Yeah, it's a lot.

And here's the good news friends, repentance is freedom. Because repentance changes us, frees us, empowers us to make change. If we don't repent, if we don't recognize the ways

our actions—or inactions—are in some way involved, then yeah maybe it's a little comforting that it's someone else's fault, but it's also demoralizing because it means we're powerless. But when we repent, when we recognize the small ways in which we have allowed hatred or violence or exploitation to persist, the ways we've even benefitted from it, then we can be different, then we can live different, and then we can make change.

Friends, change starts with us, because we are the only people we can change. And don't think that change that you make doesn't matter. Don't think that you are just one person, that you cannot make a difference. Because you can and you do. One of the nominees for this year's Noble Peace Prize is sixteen year old Greta Thunberg. Small, shy, soft-spoken, and someone who struggles with crippling depression, Thunberg is maybe not the image of the leader of a movement. And yet, she has mobilized youth in one-hundred and five countries to get involved in advocating for climate action. And yeah, we can't all have that kind of name recognition, but think about it this way. If those youth hadn't stepped up and joined Thunberg's movement, we wouldn't know her name either. Each of those hundreds of thousands of kids is important, because without their individual action there would be no collective.

The Muslim worshipers killed in prayer, the people killed for being trans, our own Jewish neighbors on North Capital who's synagogue has been vandalized twice this year, were no worse sinners. But when we repent of our own internalized fear of the other, we can be a part of building bridges between communities and ending hate crimes. The people of Mozambique or the plains states were no worse sinners. But when we repent of our own

consumption, we can advocate for climate actions to stop the fueling of super storms, we can support nation building in third world places so that natural disasters are less catastrophic, we can find ways to be generous with our own time, talents, and treasures to help those around us in need. Dear friends in Christ, these are the things we can do, the changes we can make, the power we have, that is the gift of repentance.

And to close this teaching, Jesus told a parable. "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 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?' The gardener replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" When Jesus told parables, he always cast himself as the gardener. Which means, dear people, while we are the fig tree, we are also probably the impatient landowner. We long for immediate actions, immediate results, from ourselves and others. This tree has no figs; it cannot and will not ever bear figs, what's the use in its survival, repent or perish. But Jesus is both patient and optimistic. It can, we will, as Paul will say, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." So Jesus tends the growth that is us, and friends, that's what worship is. We are pruned through confession and forgiveness, we are nourished with the word and around the table, we are sent out to grow, and brought back in again next week to repeat the process. Over and over and over again. For as long as it takes.

So dear people of God, yeah, it's scary out there. But you are not powerless. So repent, be transformed, and then go transform. Amen.