

Sermon: "Time to Repent"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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TREES UPROOTED

When I moved to Kissimmee from North Carolina, the first thing we experienced before we even had a chance to unpack all our boxes was a hurricane. Erin was her name I think. Anyway, for folks who had never experienced a hurricane, this was a big event. Carrollyn and the kids went to the grandparents' home in north Florida for safekeeping, and I stayed behind to ride out the storm.

Now fortunately Erin was not all that big a problem. By the time she reached us she was nothing more than a tropical storm. But, she was still strong enough to uproot two of the newly planted trees in my yard. You should have seen me as I braced myself against the 70 mph gusts as I tried to squish those uprooted trees back into the rain soaked ground.

One tree recovered nicely from the ordeal, but one of the trees was not doing so well. Its leaves were dropping, and I told my wife that the time had come to chop this particular tree down. But, she begged me not to do it. She said, "I hate to see anything living destroyed. Give it just one more year, and if it doesn't do any better then you can chop it down."

Reluctantly I said, "Yes dear, I'll do whatever you want." But, I just knew that tree wouldn't make it one more month, much less one more year. I was wrong. Today that tree still stands. It is the smallest of the trees that were planted when our house was built, but it is relatively healthy and productive.

THE FIG TREE

My little tree story is much like the parable that Jesus tells in our lesson for today. The only difference is that Jesus' parable is about a fig tree that was planted in a vineyard. The tree wasn't doing so well. Three years the tree had been taking up valuable orchard space, and the owner felt like the prudent thing to do was to chop the tree down. He said, "We need to make some space for a tree that can do what trees are supposed to do and produce some fruit."

But, the man's gardener had more experience. He knew that patience was a virtue in the gardening business and said, "Let's don't chop it down right now. Let's water it, fertilize it and give it a little loving care. Next year we'll see if it bears some fruit, and if it doesn't then we can chop it down."

Those of you who are students of the gospels know that this is not the only story about a fig tree. In Matthew and in Mark Jesus uses a fig tree as an example. But, in those gospels the fig tree doesn't fare so well. Jesus has no patience with the fig tree that has no fruit. In fact, he curses the tree and it withers away.

I'm not sure if today's lesson is a recasting of those stories or not, but I do know that I like the story from Luke better. I would like to think that we all have at least one more year to make things right. Perhaps we haven't born fruit this year, but I know that we're just about to turn the corner. With a little fertilizer, water and tender loving care, this year will be the year that we turn things around. This will be the year that we will be all that God has called us to be.

WAIT TILL NEXT YEAR?

What's that famous phrase in baseball, "Wait till next year?" For those of us who are Atlanta Braves fans, that hope came true. Did you know that when I was a student in seminary, the Atlanta Braves were so bad that you could buy seats in the outfield for only three dollars? And that was about what it was worth to see the Braves at that time! The patience of the Atlanta fans finally paid off. Bobby Cox finally put together a team that bore fruit. Next year came for the Atlanta Braves.

But, patience does not always pay off. For some teams "next year" seems like wishful thinking. Witness the anguish of the Chicago Cubs' fans or those who love the Boston Red Sox. You have to face facts. Sometimes the leopard does not change his spots. Sometimes it would be better to just give up on a team or a person and say, "We just need to put an end to this relationship. We have to cut this thing down. There comes a time for judgment."

So, which parable do we take as our guide for living? Do we side with Luke's Jesus who gives the unfruitful tree yet one more year? Or, do we side with the stories from Mark and Matthew where the offending tree gets what it "deserves?"

Don't be too quick to choose. I've already told you that I like Luke's more patient approach better. But, there's something to be said for the accounts from Matthew and Mark as well. After all, if you take a class in school, aren't there certain boundaries that have to be respected. The teacher spells out the requirements in the syllabus at the beginning of the course. You know that if you don't turn in three papers at the required times, there will be consequences. There will be day of reckoning at the end of the semester.

Isn't faith the same way? If a fig tree doesn't produce, what good is it? If a baseball team can't win the big one, why bother? And if a Christian doesn't follow Christ, what is the point of bearing the name? Doesn't the Bible tell us that there will be a day of reckoning?

THE DAY OF RECKONING

Indeed it does. In fact, our lesson for today from Luke fairly shouts that message at us loud and clear. In verses 1-5 you may have noticed that Jesus was talking with his disciples about the latest news from their part of the world. It had not been a good day for the people of Jerusalem.

It seems that Pilate had killed some fellow Galileans while they were worshipping in the temple. That was bad enough, but it got even worse. The blood of these victims was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices on the altar. More than that, there was also a terrible accident in Jerusalem as well. Eighteen people were killed when the Tower of Siloam collapsed and fell on them.

What's that old newspaper saying, "If it bleeds it leads?" I don't believe they had newspapers in those days, but I am sure that people in Jesus' day talked about the same sort of things that we talk about even today. We don't have any other historical records of Pilate killing some Galileans in the temple or a tower falling on some innocent bystanders, but we need not look any farther than our last newspaper to find an equivalent or even worse account of senseless violence and tragic happenings. Like the people of Jesus' day, when we see hundreds of innocent people on a train killed by terrorists, we ask ourselves, "What's this world coming to?"

The fearful part of terrorism and accidents of course is their random nature. We don't know when a terrorist might decide to do something in our community. We don't know when a plane might crash or a building might fall. But, when something tragic like this occurs people always ask why. Why did this happen? Was it something that I did? Am I being punished for breaking God's law in some way? Or, are we just unlucky?

Jesus doesn't answer that question. Instead, Jesus heightens the fear that a tragedy always brings to the surface, the fear that "it could have been me." Jesus asked the people who brought him news of this tragedy, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" (Luke 13:2)

His answer? No. They didn't deserve this more than anyone else. This tragedy should be taken as a warning. The time of judgment can come upon us quickly. None of us are promised a tomorrow. All of us must, in the words of the Psalmist, learn to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12)

THE DANGER OF ROUTINE

I must admit that there is a certain "sameness" to my life. I play golf on Monday, I take the trash out on Wednesday and Thursday, I write my sermon on Friday and Saturday morning, and I help out with the laundry and cut the grass on Saturday afternoon. Some weeks of course that routine changes, but most of the time I'm a creature of habit. Your routine is undoubtedly different, but I dare say that most of you experience a similar sameness in your life.

Now, of course there's nothing wrong with a routine. A routine can be helpful. It can provide much needed balance and structure to our existence. But, a routine can also be a problem as well. Sometimes our routine insulates us from the importance of the moment. Our routine lulls us into thinking that this day will be just like all the rest. That's not necessarily so.

Jesus asks us to seriously consider the fragility of life. Today he would ask us, "Do you really think that any of those people who got onto that train in Spain thought that their day was going to be anything other than another at the office? No, they thought it would be just another routine day."

But, it wasn't. It was a day of terrible destruction and dislocation, what some are calling the Spanish equivalent of our terrible day in September. How do we respond to an event like this? I think that we have to admire the response of the Spanish people.

They have refused to give in to their fears. They have gathered in the streets and raised their hands in solidarity for those who have fallen. They have returned to the commuter trains as a way of saying that they will not let their life be disrupted by threats and fears. They still have a life to live, and they will not let that life be changed by cowardly terrorists.

But, after this tragic event, their future rides on this commuter train will no longer be routine. They know because of what has happened that there is nothing in life that is really routine. Every day and every minute of our life is important and precious. Who and what we love can be taken away in a heartbeat. Many of us here today know that truth all too well.

WHO AND WHY?

When some tragedy like this first happens, we are consumed with answering the who and why questions. Was it Basque separatists who did this terrible thing or another terrorist group? Why did they do it? Are there any conditions in Spanish society that led to this terrible attack? Is this a just punishment for the sin?

But, Jesus tells us that these questions are not the appropriate ones. Yes, we all sin, but usually the sins of the victims are no greater than the sins of any other person. The Galileans that died in

Jerusalem, the people on whom the tower fell and the people who died on the commuter train were in the same boat. It was not a punishment for sin.

They were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Now I do believe that God can and will use evil and tragic events to bring about a greater good. But, I also know that we are usually not able to see how God's will is done in a particular way. Indeed tragic events provide the greatest challenge to those of us who believe in a merciful and forgiving God.

Those who proclaim the gospel should always be perplexed and deeply disturbed in the face of terrible tragedy and evil. We should be careful not to say too much to those who suffer in this way lest we become like Job's comforters and just offer pious platitudes in the face of unjust suffering. Sometimes it is better to say nothing at all than to say too much.

But, there are a couple of things about our faith as Christians that give us hope and comfort.

GOD SUFFERS

First, we believe that God does not stand idly by observing the suffering of His creatures. We believe that God enters into and shares our suffering. Once again we think of the significance of the crucifixion. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity suffered a shameful and cruel death. The Bible tells us that he suffered for us. It was for our sins that he died on the cross.

Philosopher and theologian Alvin Plantinga put it this way,

"Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to God's greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as God's capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the first being and Lord of the universe was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon Jesus' humiliation and death.

God was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin and death and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine. So we don't know why God permits evil; we do know, however that God was prepared to suffer on our behalf, to accept suffering of which we can form no conception."

This past week I reread an article from a Newsweek magazine that was published about four years ago. It was entitled, "Visions of Jesus: How Jews, Muslims and Buddhists View Him." According to the article, other religions have sought to understand Jesus as a prophet, a teacher, or a miracle worker, but none of them have ever been able to accept Jesus as the One who suffers on the cross for the sins of the world. They find this idea of God suffering to be absolutely abhorrent.

Whenever I hear a criticism like this, I can't help but think about the apostle Paul. Paul thought the cross of Christ was the very center of the Christian faith, and yet it was a proclamation that trouble people from the very beginning. He wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, [23] but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 1 Corinthians 1:23 (NRSV)

Many may find the message of the cross to be abhorrent or foolish. But, I would contend that it is precisely at this point that we find comfort in our hour of greatest need. On the cross we see that God is willing to enter into and share our suffering in order to redeem the world.

This doesn't answer the question as to why evil exists in the first place but it does remind the Christian that God is with us and for us no matter what terrible thing might befall us or our world. We do not suffer alone.

God, more than any other person, can understand suffering because God in Christ has suffered more than any of us can even imagine.

WE HAVE TODAY

Secondly, the Christian faith teaches us that evil and tragic occurrences are a reminder that we are not promised tomorrow but we do have today. We can learn to trust God to give us what we need this day and be grateful for the blessings of this particular day. Sometimes those sayings that we put on posters are true. Today is the first day of the rest of our life. Today is important. Today is the day that we work for peace and justice in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The way to honor the memory of those who die tragically is not to become obsessed with the question of who is at fault or what we may have done to prevent it. We can leave that question to the authorities who are trained to answer those questions. The way to honor the memory of those who died is to live our life according to God's ways instead of the ways of the world.

We can use these terrible occasions as an opportunity to repent of our faithless and thoughtless ways and go in a different direction. For us there is still time. God has given our fig tree another year to live. Let's use that time as an opportunity to grow and become productive for the kingdom of God. Let's reset our priorities in light of the values of God's kingdom instead of the values of the world's kingdoms.

Have you ever noticed that when a person loses a child or a loved one to a vicious crime that their message to the general public is remarkably the same? They say something like,

"Don't take your loved ones for granted. Tell them that you love them each and every day because you don't know what the future holds." In other words, they tell us, "It's too late for me. But, it's not too late for you. Rethink what is most important in your life and spend more time in those areas."

What is that quote that's been so popular in recent years? I've never heard anyone say on their death bed, "I wish I had spent more time at the office."

Whenever I hear someone quote that, I see heads nod in agreement, but I don't see us always putting that insight into practice. In our work a day world we get trapped into thinking that everything is of equal importance.

That's not true. There are some things that are much more important than others.

THE GOD OF THE SECOND CHANCE

Sometimes God gives us a second chance to discover that important fact. William Willimon told about a friend he knew. He said that he wasn't much of a husband and was an even worse father. He wrote,

"He was a talented physician, much in demand. Therefore he was always at the hospital, always working. I was not surprised when his wife of 20 years just one day left him. She said she didn't

know him anymore, that she couldn't take it. His children, I am told, never see him now that they are grown. Why bother? He didn't seem to want to see them when they were young.

I saw him the other day. He was remarried. At 60, he is starting over. That's what he said he was doing, starting over. He said, 'Here toward the end of my life, I'm getting a second chance. I'm going to do better this time. I've learned a thing or two. I'm going to do right.'

I expect more than one person considers him to be somewhat of a fool who didn't do much with marriage the first time around, and now getting married a second time! Yet knowing Jesus' little story of the fig tree, I, even though I don't approve of divorce and all said, "rejoice, there is still time."

The grace of God comes in many forms.

Sometimes it comes in the form of forgiveness. It comes from a Savior who as he is being crucified by a world he loves prays from the cross, "Father forgive them."

Sometimes the grace of God comes in the form of gifts given, things like the joy of marriage, the wonder of childbirth or the satisfaction of a job to do.

But, sometimes the grace of God comes in the form of time, time to learn from our mistakes and start over. Do you know what we call this second chance in the Christian Church, this time when we can do it over the right way? We call it repentance.

Repentance is not just about feeling sorry about something. Repentance is suddenly realizing that there is still time to change, to go in a different direction. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, from which we get our word *metamorphosis*. Repentance is God's way of telling us that we can change into something different. We don't have to be a dry, unproductive tree. We have time to bear fruit for God's kingdom.

One thing I know about myself and all the people to whom I preach every Sunday. We all have regrets. We have all messed up our lives in some way. We have not appreciated God's forgiveness, and we have often made a mockery of the gifts that God has given us.

But, this morning I have good news.

There is still time to change.

The question is this, "What will we do with that time?"