

Lent 3C
Luke 13: 1-9
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Do we love like Jesus?

The people have just told Jesus about two tragic incidents — one involving executed Galileans and another about eighteen who were killed by a falling tower. Why did these horrible things happen? Did these people somehow deserve this fate? There must be a reason for the unreasonable to happen. Were those who were killed judged sinful?

But Jesus doesn't accept this common practice of making judgments about others based on what's happens to them in life. He doesn't even engage in the question, because they're asking the wrong thing, deflecting attention from the real issue: we are all to live in penitence and trust before God. Life happens. The unexpected occurs. We can be simply walking along, living our lives, and difficult things will transpire. Life is fragile.

So instead of answering their questions, Jesus tells a story — the story of the fig tree, a tree that's not doing what it was made to do. It's just taking up space . . . wasting earth and squandering resources . . . not producing fruit after years of care. This story contains contrasting images, images of both the finality of judgment, as well as saving grace, a story of the great paradox and mystery of God. And both images are true.

There's the gardener showing mercy and love, fully engaged in the life of the tree, investing time and care through his own toil and sweat: tilling and aerating the ground, fertilizing the soil, insuring there's enough water and drainage for the tree, for us, to flourish. Here's an image of God as fully aware of who we are and where we are, and who willingly stands with us, caring for us, each and every day.

And our Creator is patient, recognizing who we are meant to be and longing for us to live into our purpose and our own fruitfulness. God knows our true needs, whether we can understand it or not. We may not feel comfortable with all that digging around our feet, with the stench of the manure that's fertilizing us, or with that extensive pruning to help us grow, but we are being cared for, nurtured, supported, and loved. We have the opportunity to learn and grow towards a penitent trust in our living God, who provides all that we have and all that we need. We have the choice to acknowledge our true selves and our need for repentance. We can choose new life through Christ's saving grace, and live fruitful lives.

But there is also judgment. It may not be this year, or next, but our lives will end. At some point, we will be held accountable before God for how we lived our lives, for what we've done and what we've left undone.

How to we live our lives? Do we build our lives on an illusion, feeling comfortable and safe, presuming that because we live of what we have or because of where we live, we're somehow more deserving of God's goodwill, more blessed, more favored than those living in less fortunate circumstances?

Or, do we build our lives on the knowledge that God's judgment is certain, and that we are called to love like Jesus . . . to see the light of Christ in our neighbors, to seek to serve Christ in all persons, striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Our youth Lenten series is exploring issues of race and reconciliation. Last week we began watching the movie *Selma*, which illustrates the events surrounding the march from Selma to Montgomery in the height of the civil rights movement.

A portion of the movie we watched today included Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon at the memorial service for a young man, a non-violent protestor, who was killed in Selma as he and his family tried to flee a protest march that was being brutally broken up by local and state law enforcement.

During his sermon, Dr. King provocatively asks, "who murdered Jimmy Lee Jackson?" then goes on to say, and I'm paraphrasing:

It's every law enforcement person who abuses the law in order to terrorize
It's every politician who feeds on prejudice and hate
It's every preacher who preaches the Bible but stays silent on justice
It's every person who fails to take action while their brothers and sisters are hurting and suffering.

These are jarring words, and they're meant to be. It's a message evoking the spirit of Matthew 25 and the judgment of the nations: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not provide for the least of these, you did not provide for me."

Our natural assumptions and preconceived notions, our biases and prejudices. The way we see the world. It can be hard to recognize this sinfulness within us, much less our society's systems and structures. It's like the air. We don't notice it at all, unless it smells bad. It's just part of what's in us, what's around us. It's part of our life.

This Lenten season is the time to examine ourselves, our systems, our structures. It's the time to smell the air around us, to recognize our need to repent, and turn back to God, accepting our call to love like Jesus.

Could this mean taking a look at how we perceive race? Is it enough to be color-blind, or do we need to work towards becoming anti-racist by better understanding systems and structures that can unjustly affect people of color? Fr. Keith has suggested reading the book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, which tells Stevenson's personal story of his life as an attorney defending the poor and those trapped in very dark places within our criminal justice system. It is a moving and troubling read. Or you can watch *Selma*, even if you know the story, so you can see a different perspective. It helps to hear other voices, to see situations through the eyes of others, for we do not yet live in a post-racial era. There's still work to be done and it starts with listening.

How do we perceive our neighbors who practice other religions, like Islam? What assumptions do we have about immigrants and refugees? Do we pre-judge the poor and the marginalized?

We are called to do more than buy into political soundbites that can feed into our prejudices and fears. We are all God's beloved children and are called to act with compassion and respect for every human being. We are called to love like Jesus.

Take the time to listen, to discern, and to discover who we are and our need for repentance. We all need to turn back to God and towards living fruitful lives. Repentance is a *whole body* experience, enmeshed in a willingness to listen deeply, to challenge our perspectives, and to be transformed through grace. With God's help, we can move away from fear and prejudice, we

can speak out against injustice, we can care for the poor and the marginalized. Strengthened by the Spirit, we can live lives that reflect our love of God, by loving our neighbor.

Grab hold of this image of the fig tree. There is a sense of urgency about attending to God's business, about paying attention and using all our gifts and resources to live fruitful lives, for our lives will not go on forever, and we will be held accountable. And this image sits side by side with the truth that God is infinitely patient, allowing another season and another, for us to turn back towards him.

How do we choose to live our lives? Are we striving to follow Jesus, striving to shift our piece of this world a little more toward justice and mercy and compassion? What is it that needs to be transformed within us, so we can truly love like Jesus?

Amen.