

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 13:1–9

Sermon: “The Gift of Repentance”

For over sixty years, their father had been a pastor, faithful, well known, and well respected by his brothers in the ministry actively serving congregations until just a few years ago, up into his eighties. Two of his five children were now pastors, plus two of his many grandchildren. But now his pastor was the one he needed. Dad was dying. All the family was there the three sons, two daughters, and their spouses, all those grandchildren, and even lots of the great-grandchildren. The room was full, and everyone knew this would soon be it.

Then, quietly, their dad asked everyone to step outside . . . except Pastor. His pastor. Out in the hallway, one of his daughters asked, “What’s Dad doing?” “Private confession,” one of the pastor-sons answered. “Confession? He’s been a pastor all his life. What’s he got to confess?” The four pastors in the family, almost in chorus, nodded knowingly. Within the hour, their dad was alive with Jesus.

It's not just those we consider "great" sinners who need to repent. We all need to daily. ***"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*** It may well be the very faithful Christian, even the dear dying pastor, who best understands that he is a poor miserable sinner and most appreciates the comfort of Christ's forgiveness. In our text today, Jesus would have us all appreciate that more deeply, that we turn toward Jesus, for in Him there is life.

Jesus calls not just the "greatest" sinners, but all of us to repent. In our Gospel Jesus is asked about the death of a local group of Galileans. They had been murdered by Roman governor Pontius Pilate, in a gruesome way. We don't have a lot of details about their deaths or why, but the social tension between Jews and Romans made revolutionary activity possible at any time. Galileans were especially likely to revolt since they were surrounded geographically by Gentiles. What is clear is that they were killed while in worship like a church shooting today.

Essentially, the crowd wanted Jesus' opinion: "Why do bad things happen to good Galileans?" Jesus turns the tables. He dismisses the idea that this was a bad thing happening to good Galileans. Well, then, were these Galileans especially bad sinners. No! Sin is sin and all fall short of the glory of God and to repent. Jesus adds another example (vs 4–5). There is no historical record of this incident either, the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem falling on eighteen people. It must have been another recent news story. But again, no, these eighteen people were not especially wicked; they were just like us! In need of repentance!

Jesus refuses to lean into a theology of glory by attributing human tragedy to individual sin, as the Jews often did (John 9:1–3). Rather, Jesus affirms that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory and are thus in need of repentance. Every human tragedy is a call from God to repent. The world is irreparably dirty due to sin. Our good deeds, in any attempt to clean up our own sin, are as ***"filthy rags"*** (Isaiah 64:6). Our rags are soiled beyond any human ability to make them clean again.

Jesus always levels the playing field. He is basically saying, It's just a matter of time before we all suffer the same fate. Death will come for us all. No one gets out alive. Our only hope is repenting in faith. Our only hope is turning away from our sin and turning to Jesus

On May 21, 2021, six-year-old Aiden Leos's mother was driving him to kindergarten on the 55 Freeway in Southern California. After she became angry at being cut off by another car and made her anger visible a passenger in the other car fired a 9mm Glock pistol into her car. Aiden was killed. No one would suggest Aiden Leos was a worse sinner than countless others on the freeway that morning. As deeply as his mother might regret her own actions, no one would suggest she any more earned such a tragic loss.

And there is no way to ***“get into the mind of God”*** to make sense of why this happened. But God is not to blame. Rebellious mankind is to blame for all manner of random loss of life, both through accidents and from willful wickedness.

Every story of tragedy is a call to repentance and a moment in time to cry out to God for redemption as found in his Son, Jesus Christ.

To all those who do repent, Jesus promises life. For years even millennia Israel had been God's chosen people. He's been expecting fruit of righteousness in keeping with repentance and faith. But instead, Israel had responded to his goodness with sin just as we, every single one of us, sin against God daily. The time, it seems, has come to cut them down, to give us what we all deserve. But the vinedresser, Christ Jesus, steps forward and pleads patience. ***"Let me do everything I yet can for them, and if they repent, bear fruit, well, that's what we've always wanted. If they refuse to repent, then we shall cut them down."***

The primary point of the parable is to display God's patience in not wanting any person to perish, but to repent and find life in his Son. The Christian life is to be daily repentance. Sin's consequences affect all people, so now is the time to repent and to live lives which bear fruit.

Turn in faith toward Jesus, for in him there is life. Jesus says elsewhere, in John 15: ***“I am the vine; you are the branches. . . . Every branch in me that does not bear fruit [the Father] takes away, . . . and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”*** But ***“whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. . . . As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. . . . Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you”*** (John 15:5a, 2, 6, 5b, 4–5a, 3).

Jesus’ call to bear fruit is always an invitation to cling to him. Jesus understands all the tragedies and death of our sinful world in ways we never can. He knows that we can’t bear fruit apart from him. That’s precisely why Jesus hung on the cross, that we might bear fruit and live, not be cut down and thrown into the fire. Notice Jesus says we are already clean right now. That’s because we each are connected to him through baptismal waters. We are enabled to bear much fruit.

Jesus teaches that repentance unto life bears fruit. In turning to Jesus for new life, we are called to lead lives that produce the fruit that's really made by the power of the Holy Spirit: ***“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”*** (Galatians 5:22–23). This is the kind of life we live. Our fruit really is the work of Jesus. God doesn't need our good works. We're connected to Jesus, the vine, to bear fruit for our neighbor, that the world may know the Father sent his Son.

By the new life we have in Jesus, we can even help to be a salve to those who have suffered the inexplicable tragedies that result from sin. We who have life in Jesus, who are no greater sinners, no lesser sinners than anyone else, will suffer death as surely, tragedy as often, as everyone else. But we can use our lives in Jesus to witness God's inexplicable love to others in their tragedies.

The tragedy of our text is that Jesus' hearers were pridefully trying to position themselves as “better than” those who lost their lives in random ways.

We are called to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Yet even the good fruit we bear is not enough to make us righteous before God. The faithful pastor on his deathbed, the seemingly innocent child, the grieving mother, all need to repent; we are all sinners deserving only to be cut down.

Jesus is the tree that was cut down by his Father on a Roman cross, unjustly condemned by Pilate. Jesus is the tree that the Father victoriously raised three days later to invite us, as Gentiles, to be grafted into that Holy Tree. Our repentance is only possible because of our redemption accomplished by the crucified and risen Jesus. Turn in faith toward Jesus, for in him there is life.

Amen