

March 20, 2022, St. Peter Lutheran Church, Doss, TX; “One More Chance”

Luke 13:1-9 ¹About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. ²“Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?” Jesus asked. “Is that why they suffered? ³Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. ⁴And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? ⁵No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.”

⁶Then Jesus told this story: “A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. ⁷Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s just taking up space in the garden.’ ⁸“The gardener answered, ‘Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. ⁹If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.’” (NLT)

What were Jesus’ listeners to learn from the parable that includes the two news events. One was about Pilate’s attack on Galileans and the second, about the tower at Siloam fatally falling on people. This season of Lent, like Advent, is a season of preparation and of repentance. The parable paints a bigger picture that applies to us all.

What would Jesus do in the world as a vinedresser? His personal ministration was only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and when his relation to the world is spoken of it is never that of one tending the world's vines - that world is a wilderness, a jungle, and must first be converted into a vineyard. All this points to the solution that the vineyard is Israel and the fig tree is Israel's center of worship, Jerusalem.

The parable thus connects directly with the incident that Jesus himself brought forward (v. 4, 5) when He spoke of "all the men that are dwelling at Jerusalem." Now the fig tree that is planted in the vineyard belongs to this vineyard. So, from the Galileans that Pilate slew, Jesus turned to all Galileans; from the 18 on whom the tower fell in Jerusalem, He expands to all who inhabit Jerusalem. Even though in the parable the attention centers on the fig tree, what is said about it and done with it extends to the whole vineyard. The fate of Jerusalem directly affects all of Israel.

It is precisely because the owner planted this fig tree in his own vineyard that he had every right to expect it to bear fruit. The tree had grown to full maturity in the very best of places. Jerusalem was not the capital of some pagan nation. The owner who comes seeking fruit from the fig tree had come on earlier occasions. It is not said that he comes to gather the fruit but just to see whether there is fruit, whatever its stage of development. "And he did not find it" tells the sad

story. Where was the trouble? Not with the owner or with the vinedresser or with the vineyard. This was apparently a good-for-nothing tree. Whether it was permanently and hopelessly so was the point to be determined. "Fruit" means true repentance and faithful service.

What is meant by the "three years"? Just how often the owner had inspected the tree is not indicated and nor important; the point is that he had waited a long time in vain.

Jesus had used the exact words of the Baptist: "except you repent," in v. 3 and 5, and here in the parable we again have the Baptist's imagery of the ax "cutting out" this unfruitful tree from the vineyard. These three years start with the Baptist's work when he cried, "Repent!" Note how carefully Luke fixed that date in 3:1-3, "*fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor.*" Three years have now passed. Jerusalem has stood for a long time already, but God sent the Baptist and Jesus during these three years to call for repentance. There had been some. It should have been more already in the Baptist's day and even more with Jesus' preaching. But there was little fruit.

"This year also" was the final work of Jesus and does not necessarily mean twelve full months but the time that was still left to Jesus when he spoke this parable. Jesus was not as yet done with Jerusalem. He was now on his way to this city for his last effort. Jerusalem was ready for judgment already at this time, but grace extended the time. "This year also" extends from that moment until the death and the glorification of Jesus at the second Coming.

It may seem as though there is a disagreement between God and Jesus when we hear the owner give this order and the vinedresser urge delay. That this is not the case becomes apparent when the owner at once consents to this delay. This, too, is the constant teaching of Scripture which extends God's longsuffering to the utmost.

When God bestows his grace and care upon anyone, by remaining unfruitful he also prevents that grace from being used to far better effect with someone else. It is only right that he should be removed and another take his place, as was in the case in Acts 1 when Judas was replaced.

This vinedresser is undoubtedly Christ. The idea is not that the Father is severe, that Jesus alone merciful, for the Father accepts the intercession, and Jesus, the cutting down. We should not erase the wrath by the mercy, nor lose sight of the mercy because of the wrath. Both are real, and neither is absolute. Jesus is the Mediator and the basis of Jesus' intercession in his atoning sacrifice which is by no means only an assurance for us of God's disposition toward us, but first of all and most vitally, a placation and satisfaction that is rendered to God by which our sins are wiped out. This sacrifice and satisfaction occurred at a definite time when Jesus bore our sins

here on earth. But in the mind and the purpose of God, it was for all eternity. Jesus speaks in the parable as Mediator and Intercessor and the Father accepts the intercession.

Jesus came to do his Father's will and is thus pictured as the caretaker of the vineyard, who as such addressed the owner as "lord." But this vine dresser does not act and speak as a hired servant who merely carries out orders, for he is as much concerned about the tree as is the owner, and the owner, too, treats him accordingly.

The tree is not only to have more time; it is to receive the vinedresser's intensive care. Jesus uses every means of grace; it is on us to receive and come to the fruit of repentance and new life.

"And if it shall make fruit soon after" is broken off for effect and displays the vinedresser's feelings at the prospect of securing fruit at last. And we should note that the condition is one of expectancy; the vinedresser goes at his work hopefully, looking for the good result, not halfheartedly, pessimistically, thinking that there is no use. Jesus is an optimist when it comes to working with sinners.

The impenitent may misunderstand this and treat the abundance of grace presumptuously and make their judgment only the more severe. In the end the sinner himself sees this, is compelled to admit it, and his complete self-blame makes his punishment the keener.

The Lutheran theologian, Lenski, says: "We reject every idea of man's liberty to decide between God and Satan, fruit and unfruitfulness. Man has already decided and holds to that decision. But the grace of God is brought to bear upon him with power from on high in order to release his will from its bondage and wicked decision and to produce power by this and by it alone a totally different decision. But man may nullify every effort of that liberating, saving power and willfully cast it from him for good and all. His doom is then sealed, and sealed by himself. But if the power of saving grace succeeds in freeing him, not he or any free decision of his will is the decisive factor or even a helping factor in his freeing; the work is wholly one of grace, and the glory of it belongs to that grace alone."

What about us? Are we fruitful? What excuses do we make for ourselves? This parable and the discussion of Jesus in our Gospel addresses this and it is not a popular topic. Maybe we figure we can have our cake and eat it too when it comes to God's grace. But don't fall into that trap. Recall the Gospel for today. There is only so much time given before the tree is dealt with. The tragedy would come when someone tries to defend himself to the Lord saying that they somehow didn't know.

What is the end goal? Bearing fruit that befits repentance, is it not? Paul said: (Acts 20:24) *My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—*

the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God. Another translation says: that I may finish my race with joy.

Joy comes from seeing the complete fulfillment of the specific purpose for which you were created and born again, not from successfully doing something of your own choosing. The joy our Lord experienced came from doing what the Father sent Him to do. And He says to us, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21).

Have you received ministry opportunities from the Lord? I’m sure you have helped others. But you must be faithful to it—to consider your life valuable only for the purpose of fulfilling that ministry. Knowing that you have done what Jesus sent you to do, think how satisfying it will be to hear Him say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). To see those opportunities and hear His call, we must have close fellowship with Jesus and must know Him as our personal Savior. And we must be willing to experience the full impact of Acts 9(16) where He will show us how many things we must suffer for Christ’s name.

Jesus said, “Do you love Me?” Then, “Feed My sheep” (John 21:17). He is not offering us a choice of how we can serve Him; He is asking for absolute loyalty to His commission, a faithfulness to what we discern when we are in the closest possible fellowship with Him. All of us have received a ministry opportunity from the Lord Jesus. He calls us to be faithful to that ministry. As we live out the six marks of discipleship you see on the large bulletin marker, it will help you to be sensitive to what God has called you to do so that you can follow through.

Does having that kind of fruitfulness in the eyes of the Owner of the vineyard seem difficult? We might argue that we are putting out a few figs here and there so do not deserve to be cut down. We might blame the vinedresser. After all, he is an expert with vines. What would He know about figs? Except that the Vinedresser is Jesus who intercedes on our behalf saying, ‘Give them one more chance.’”

We don’t know what the outcome was for that fig tree, but we do know the outcome of the fig tree that is Jerusalem. In 70 A.D., the Romans cut it down. We are called to be serious in seeking, embracing, and loving our Lord Jesus. This season of Lent is about self-examination asking God for us to see us as He sees us. It is about prayer, repentance, and the bearing of fruit. Jesus asked Peter: Do you love Me? Then feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. That applies to you and me as we aim at being faithful to the ministry opportunities before us each day. Amen