

Sermon on Luke 13:1-9
Third Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Do any of you need more time? If you are anything like me, you would like to have a lot more time to get some things done. I find that I am always running out of time. Because there's just not enough time in a day – only 24 hours! I guess that's a very “white” thing to say – it's a Western, European, linear view of time – that there's a limited amount of time for all of us, and time just keeps ticking away. Like in a hockey, basketball, or football game – the seconds just keep ticking away until you are done, and the game is over. Sometime “time is your friend” and sometimes it is not. There are other clichés, too: like *time is money*. *Don't waste your time*. *Time is precious*. *So be on time; don't be late*. I could go on and on (but I don't have time!) If I preach more than 15 minutes, some of you will turn me off.

Everyone doesn't look at time in this way. There are other cultures in the world who see time as more circular, and are less worried about *being on time*. Like there is “Asian time”. There's “Indian time”. (I guess there is “white people's time” and there is “brown people's time.” And whoever is in charge has the privilege of deciding what time it is.)

Then there is *God's time*. With God, a minute might seem a lifetime to us, and a hundred years might be an eternity. When we look for something good to happen, or wait for God to give us an answer to our prayers, we can get awfully impatient! But the wise man or woman just tells us to wait, for the answers will come “all in good time” – or rather, in *God's time*. And there is *kairos* time – a Greek word that means the moment of time when God does something brand new for us. It's a time of excitement, of newness, a time of salvation – when God is working in us and in other human beings to do a brand new thing!

Today we hear a story about how *time* can be a sign of grace and forgiveness, a gift! How when we have failed or fallen down, and need time for repairs or to be healed and renewed, *time can be a precious gift from God!* This is what Jesus is getting at in the gospel lesson today.

Luke tells how Jesus was teaching in parables to the crowd of people who had come to hear him, a crowd numbering in the thousands. He was teaching them about the last days, on watchfulness and being prepared for the days of suffering that were to come. (Was he speaking of the persecutions of early Christians, which Luke would have known a lot about, writing the gospel down years later?) He had just said “*when you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say it's going to rain.*” When will such times be, the crowd must have wondered?

Ironically, today's passage begins like this: *At that very time, there were some present who told him some bad news: some Galileans had been killed by the Romans under Pontius Pilate, whose blood had been mixed with their sacrifices in the Temple. What did Jesus think of that abhorrent tragedy? Jesus answered, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."* In other words, what the Romans did to them had nothing to do with their sins – they weren't worse sinners than anyone else, so they could not be blamed for being victims of a ruthless, oppressive regime. We can understand that.

He went on, referencing a terrible construction accident that had recently happened, which was all the news. *"Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent (unless you change), you will perish just as they did."* We all understand intellectually that when accidents happen (car accidents, boat accidents, construction accidents, drowning or natural disasters), these are not the fault of the victim. They are just a matter of "bad luck", or an unfortunate accident, when such things happen. Although sometimes we human beings want to create a reason, to try to make sense of these terrible things that happen – doesn't there have to be a reason *why*? No, there doesn't – but we keep searching for one. So we invent concepts like *karma* – where we say all the good or bad things you do in life add up, so that when you have done enough bad things (or your ancestors have), it builds up and bad things (or good things) can happen to you. So there is *good karma and bad karma*. That's not a Christian concept – but many people believe it! Or people will say "God must have a reason" – which only leads us to blame God when bad things happen, like a loved one, or a child, dies. Like, *God must have wanted an angel* – I'll bet you've heard that one. When I hear that I think "*just stop it already!*" None of that is going to help – unless having a BAD reason for death or disaster, and blaming God, is something you think is a good thing! I don't!

So when it happens to you or me, we want people to say kind things, like *"it doesn't make any sense at all, but I'm here to support you, whatever you need."* Whether it's to bring a hot dish, do some errands or shovel the snow – which you don't have the energy to do – now THAT's more helpful than the explanations or folk wisdom you often hear from well-meaning people, that hurts. The people wanted Jesus to say why the Galileans were killed by Pilate (what had they done, what reason did God have?), and why 18 were killed by a falling tower – it just happened. (This was in the days before OSHA, when construction engineers could be cited for negligence or bad safety procedures.)

I remember last year, when there was a terrible accident at the new stadium being built for the Vikings in Minneapolis. A man was working on the glass roof,

and accidentally fell to his death. It was a terrible thing. There was an investigation, of course. Maybe he was lax in wearing his safety harness. Who knows, maybe there was a reason. *But it wasn't because this man was a sinner!* And the best thing for everyone to do was not to find a theological reason for his death, but rather to support his family and surround them with care (and help provide for his wife and children's future.)

When bad things happen to us, we want sympathy, or empathy. We want people to understand our pain, and pray for us. And when we do wrong, we don't want people to talk about us, or condemn us. We want forgiveness and mercy. A second chance – right? But if somebody we don't know suffers, we might wonder what they did wrong. Or if they do wrong, we will talk about them forever! Look what happened! They must have done something wrong! Why are people poor, or suffer from hunger? They must not live right – they must choose to live that way, and by their bad choices, they are living in poverty. Right? They couldn't pay on their mortgage, what a shame! They live on food stamps, but they want to buy snacks and soda pop, or worse – cigarettes and beer! They must be doing drugs – which we think is a moral failing, not a disease. So they are poor because they are sinners, and that's what they deserve. That's when OTHER people suffer – not us. If it's us, we want help – counseling, a second chance, forgiveness of our debts. But sympathy for other peoples' suffering is hard to imagine – especially among Christians. We can be so mean.

So Jesus said, "*But unless you repent, you will all perish, just as they did.*" Why did Jesus say that? Sounds pretty harsh. Was it for the crowds, the Pharisees, or for his disciples? And by the way, in the Bible, *repent* means to totally change your ways, your direction, and how you look at things. Not just be "sorry", or to "really be sorry" and "really mean it" – but to *change*. To follow God's direction, not old, failed ways. To follow Jesus, on a new path.

So Jesus told them this parable, about a fig tree that wasn't growing very much, and wasn't bearing any fruit. No figs on this fig tree. Sounds like you and me, sometimes. When we're not very successful in our lives, when we fail and fall short. The owner said that fig tree should be cut down, and turned into firewood. Like people might say about us – that we're worthless. Or when they say to put that kid in jail, and throw away the key, because he'll never amount to anything. We do that with a lot of people these days – it's called *mass incarceration*. It starts with children who are poor and hungry, whose parents aren't able or willing to care for them, and they fall behind in school, aren't able to read by third grade, and drop out, and end up jobless, in poverty, even in jail for life. It's called the *school to prison pipeline*. And we allow it to happen when we think that children in poverty will never amount to anything, that they aren't able to succeed, or don't want to, or are stupid, or lazy, or blame their parents. So we give up on them. The tragedy of

America today is that potentially the richest country in the world is not able to support and nurture the growth of children in our care, and let them slip nameless and forgotten into poverty, or lock them away in jail, or put them to work in *For Profit Prisons where the corporations get rich, and the prisoners never get out.* But Jesus says, “*Unless you repent, you will all perish, as they do.*” It’s time to make a change – in our own attitudes, as well as our nation’s policies.

But back to our story. The gardener in the parable said “*no, don’t cut it down, give it another year. I’ll put manure on it – good compost – let’s see if it will grow figs next year!*” In the story, the gardener intercedes, and asks for more time, for grace and mercy – and manure for nurture – which is what the fig tree really needs. Surprise, surprise! Just like Jesus intercedes for us. Jesus gives you and me endless time, second chances, third chances, fourth chances, and lots of nurture to help us grow. (Here is the one Sunday when we can truly say that the good news is the manure that we need!)

So the gospel takes a question about judgment and disaster – the death of Galileans, a tower falling on unfortunate people, and a fig tree that isn’t growing – and turns it into the good news of grace! It surprises us with the fact that there is no reason needed for these disasters which happened, or the slow growth of a plant – but comfort and mercy were very much needed, and so was nurture and time! This is what Jesus did on the cross – by dying NOT to satisfy a judgmental God who demands sacrifice, but to show empathy, to show that GOD KNOWS people die terrible deaths for no fault of their own, but because of natural causes, accidents, or the cruelty of others. Jesus came to show us, and all the suffering people of this world, God’s mercy, forgiveness, comfort and nurture. Jesus came to show us the way to truly live, with love for God and neighbor. God raised Jesus from the dead, to show us the power of God to give life EVEN AFTER WE HAVE DIED! If God can do that, then God can truly forgive us our sins, show us mercy, and a second chance to live in a brand, new way! Because God has all the time in the world to show mercy!

So you and I are invited to repent, to turn around, to come to our senses and return to God – to live as God made us to live. Like the prophet Isaiah said, “*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!...Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that God may have mercy on them, and to our God, who will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*”

So return to the Lord your God, my friends, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And God has all the time in the world for you and for me. Thanks be to God! Amen.

