

“The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree”

Luke 13:1-9

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Third Sunday in Lent

In the Gospels, Jesus tells two different parables about fig trees. Today we’re going to consider the one that is, perhaps, less well known. At least, it’s the one that is less familiar to me. In fact, I decided to preach on this passage today *because* this passage is not as familiar to me as it should be.

Jesus offers the parable in a particular context. Luke begins the story with this fairly cryptic line: “At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” Jesus has been teaching large crowds of people on a variety of different topics. But that teaching got interrupted. People in the crowd were talking about something that Pontius Pilate – the Roman governor of the region that contained Jerusalem – had done. Unfortunately we don’t have much information about what, exactly, that was. Luke says that he “had mingled” the “blood” of some “Galileans” “with their sacrifices.” None of the other Gospel writers mention this, nor do any of the other sources we have about Pilate’s rule. What we do know is that there was a great deal of tension between Pilate and the people that he ruled, tension that sometimes resulted in riots and violence. One time, Pilate placed imperial standards with the image of the Emperor in Jerusalem. Pious Jews were offended; they saw this as a form of idolatry. A crowd rioted at Pilate’s house for five days. Pilate considered killing the protesters, but he eventually backed down and removed the standards. Another time, Pilate took money out of the treasury in the Jewish temple to pay for the construction of an aqueduct. That also offended the pious Jews. A mob formed in Jerusalem, and Pilate ordered his men to beat the rioters with clubs. Many Jews were killed in the violence that followed. There were other incidents like that throughout Pilate’s 10-year reign. His first inclination was always to respond with violence. This brief reference in Luke’s gospel suggests that there were some Jews from Galilee who had gone to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. Something violent happened, and some of those Galilean Jews were killed. It seems that the surviving Galileans were still able to offer their sacrifices – but Pilate took some of the blood from the ones who had been killed and mixed it with the blood of the animals that the Galilean Jews had brought to be sacrificed. Whatever else Pilate may have done, he certainly defiled their sacrifice, showing his contempt for Jewish religious customs and for the sanctity of the holy temple. So, of course, people were talking about it, and wanting to tell Jesus.

Jesus turns this incident into a lesson. He asks the crowd: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” He answers his own question: “No, I tell you.” Those Galilean Jews who had run afoul of Pilate were no more sinful than any other Jew in Galilee. Remember, most of the early part of Jesus’ ministry took place in Galilee, so many of the people in the crowd around Jesus were likely Galileans. Jesus was saying, “*You* are no better than

those people who suffered because of what Pilate.” Don’t think of yourselves as morally superior, because you are not. “Unless you repent,” Jesus says, “you will all perish as they did.”

I have a feeling that the people who were talking about what Pilate had done were wanting Jesus to denounce Pilate. I suspect they were surprised when Jesus turned the story on *them*.

Jesus then brings up another incident: “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?” He’s referring to a second event that we know practically nothing about. The fall of the tower of Siloam is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament, or in any other historical sources from that time. What we know there was a pool in Jerusalem called the “pool of Siloam;” that’s where Jesus told the man who had been born blind to go wash himself in order to regain his sight, in the Gospel of John. We also know that the wall surrounding Jerusalem bent inward near the pool of Siloam, and that the city wall had towers stationed along it in various places. So it sounds like there was a tower on the city wall near the pool of Siloam, and it was called the “tower of Siloam,” and at some point, probably during the early part of Jesus’ ministry, it collapsed. Such things happen from time to time; it’s really no different than the stories we hear today of bridges that collapse when they are no longer structurally sound. Sometimes structural collapses like that kill people. When the tower of Siloam fell, 18 people died. Jesus asks the crowd if those 18 people “were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem.” Were they being punished because of their sins? Sometimes people think that, of course; sometimes people think that when bad things happen, it’s some form of punishment from God.

But Jesus’ point is that no, those 18 people who died were not any worse sinners than anyone else who was living in Jerusalem when the tower fell. Just because they died tragically didn’t mean that God was less pleased with them than with any other people. The crowds needed to get that idea out of their mind. Jesus says, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” What Jesus is saying to the crowd is that they need to be more focused on their *own* moral failures than the moral failures of other people. Stop thinking about how sinful the people whom Pilate killed may or may not have been – stop thinking about how sinful the people who died when the tower fell may or may not have been – and instead, *start* thinking about your *own* sins, the ways *you* fail or disappoint God.

It is the season of Lent. A time for inward reflection, for a renewed attention to all the ways that we all, each one of us, *individually*, sin against God. We have a tendency of pointing fingers, of pointing out all the flaws we see in other people. Jesus invites us to point the finger at *our self*.

That is the backdrop that leads into the parable that Jesus tells. It’s a fairly simple parable. There is a fig tree, and a vineyard owner, and a gardener who works for the owner. Jesus begins: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.” Fig trees are native to the Holy Land; they are one of seven agricultural products that grew plentifully in the land, and figs were a regular part of people’s daily diet. Grapes were too. So there would have been nothing unusual about planting a fig tree in a vineyard, and under normal circumstances there’s no reason why a fig tree wouldn’t have produced an abundant amount of fruit, especially if it was tended by a gardener. But, as Jesus explains, the owner of the vineyard “came looking for fruit on it and found none.” This happened repeatedly, over a period of three years. Finally the owner of the vineyard confronts the gardener: “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” The vineyard owner has had enough; he wants to see real *fruit*, taste some real *figs*; and if this tree can’t produce it, then the only sensible thing to do is replace the tree with one that *will* bear fruit.

The gardener, however, sees things differently. He thinks the fig tree deserves one more chance. He says to the vineyard owner: “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

That is where the parable ends. Jesus says no more about it. If he gave an interpretation, it didn’t get preserved. If the crowd asked him any questions, they are lost to history. This parable is not in any of the other gospels; we can’t turn to them for help. But the parable’s meaning is pretty clear.

God plants a vineyard. That vineyard, originally, was the people of Israel, the people whom God had chosen to be his special possession. God made a covenant with the people of Israel through Abraham. Abraham was faithful, but many of his descendants were not. God made another covenant with the people through Moses, a covenant that included a Law that outlined in very clear detail what was expected of the people. But the people rebelled against God’s Law time and time again. God sent prophet after prophet to call the people back to God’s ways, and time and again some people were faithful, and many were not. Finally, God has sent Jesus. Note the vineyard owner’s words carefully: “For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree.” Some interpreters link the first year with Abraham, and the second year with Moses, and the third year with Jesus. Others see a parallel to the three years of Christ’s ministry. There is probably more than one faithful interpretation. What is clear is that the vineyard owner is reaching the end of his patience. Three years is *plenty* of time to see if that fig tree is going to bear fruit. He’s ready to cut it down. But the gardener intercedes on behalf of the fig tree. That, of course, is what Jesus does; Christ *is* the great intercessor. He plays a mediatorial role between humans and God. Christ, in his great mercy, feels that the people deserve one more chance – that *we* deserve one more chance. He does not ask God to spare the tree forever – just give it *one more year* to see if it will bear fruit. “If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

That “year” is a metaphor. It’s a metaphor for the final judgment, the second coming of Christ, which will come at some point down the road that is known only to God. Between now and then, we all have one more opportunity, one *final* opportunity to bear fruit, the kind of fruit that God is looking to find on that barren fig tree. *Spiritual* fruit, the fruit of righteousness, a righteousness born in faith.

That ought to give us pause. Recall how this passage began, with references to two incidents that led Jesus to say this: “unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” He said those words not just once, but twice. Then he told the parable, a parable about a tree that is doomed to destruction, *unless* it bears fruit. Put all that together and what do you get? An earnest call for genuine *repentance*.

It is, as I said earlier, the season of Lent. A time for inward reflection, for a renewed attention to all the ways that we all sin against God. There are two kinds of sin – sins of *commission*, and sins of *omission*. Sins of commission are the things that we *do* that are contrary to God’s will, and we are guilty of plenty of those. Sins of omission are the things that we *fail* to do that God calls to do, and we are guilty of plenty of those as well. Our natural tendency is to remain stuck in our sins, whatever they are, perhaps confessing them to God in our private prayers or in our corporate prayers of confession. But God is not interested in people who are *stuck*. God is interested in a tree that *bears fruit* – fruit that grows and matures and ripens over time. So we need to consider: How are we *growing*? How are we *maturing*? How are we *ripening*? How are we *bearing fruit* – the fruit of genuine *repentance*?

Or to put this another way: in what ways do we need to *change*, to bear *more fruit* for God?

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