



reLent: "repent"

Luke 13:1-9

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There are weeks when the holy scripture we read in this holy place admittedly feels far removed from our modern day lives. This is not one of those weeks.

The beginning of this gospel text could be pulled straight from our own newspapers. Jesus is talking with his followers, and he receives word that a number of Galileans have been killed, their blood mingled with their sacrifice. In other words, a number of people were killed just as they were offering their sacrifice to God. Remember, now, sacrifices were only ever offered at the temple. Which means a number of people were killed as they innocently went about their own business, engaging in practices of worship within the walls of their tradition's sacred space.

The Holy City of Jerusalem and Christchurch, New Zealand. They have very little in common. They *had* very little in common.

"What do you think," Jesus says. "Were the ones killed worse sinners than anyone else?" And then there's the story of the collapsing tower of Siloam. Where the eighteen killed then worse sinners than all the rest? Jesus might as well be asking, "What do you think? Those who died when the Twin Towers fell — were they more sinful than the rest of New York?"

Two examples, both way too easy to relate to. One the result of specific but harmless actions. One the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Two examples, both of which Jesus uses to call into question one of the

most problematic ideas for all humanity — the idea that life is fair.

Now, that idea certainly is attractive. Those who do good, have a good life. Those who do bad, have a bad life. You reap what you sow. You get what you deserve. Everything happens for a reason. But to all of that, Jesus says, not once, but twice, "No."

"No," he says, "these innocent victims are no more to blame than you." Elsewhere, he says it this way: "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good; rain falls on the just and the unjust."¹

And not for nothing, but this whole idea of good things happening to good people and bad things happening to bad people? Friends, Jesus hanging, crucified on the cross, is all the evidence we need to dismiss this faulty way of thinking. At least, it ought to be.

Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School, was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer at the age of 35 years old. She has a husband, a beautiful young toddler, and a blossoming career. She knows better than most that life is not fair, that an enormous amount of our human existence defies explanation and understanding and reason. But that hasn't stopped people from trying to offer her all those things.

She writes, "I am the one who is dying. But most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming

¹ Matthew 5:45

chaos. That my having cancer is all part of God's plan. Even when I was still in the hospital, a neighbor came to the door and told my husband that everything happens for a reason. 'I'd love to hear it,' he replied. 'I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying [in her 30s].'"²

You and I both know there is no reason, no answer, that offers any real satisfaction — at least not without undermining God or belittling human suffering. There is no reason, and so Jesus does not leave us there to ponder theodicy for very long. Instead, he leads us into a conversation we likely use theodicy to avoid — a conversation about our need for repentance,³ a conversation that comes in the shape of a story about a fig tree.

A man owns a vineyard and plants a fig tree, but year after year and year, he comes looking for fruit, only to be disappointed. So he tells his gardener, "Just cut it down! It is a waste of resources." And the gardener says, "Give it one more year. Let me tend to it. Don't give up on it quite yet."

Preacher and teacher Barbara Lundblad says, "Maybe the vineyard is the whole earth. Maybe it's the church. Maybe it's your life and mine. Jesus isn't giving up on any of us — you, me, the church, the whole earth. There's hope in this parable — don't cut the tree down. But there's also urgency — give me one more year."⁴

This could be heard as a threat, she acknowledges, but it also could be heard as hope. "Jesus wants us to live. His passion for us is marked by great urgency. Don't wait! Look at your life and dare to ask the hard questions [and engage the difficult issues.]"

Two weeks ago I traveled to Seattle for the NEXT Church conference. NEXT Church — that's the name — is a movement within the

Presbyterian Church (USA) I have been fortunate to be part of since its earliest days. It is a relational community of Presbyterian leaders who believe the PCUSA is and will continue to be a vibrant and thriving church — and that the church, in an ever-increasingly secular world, still has a vital role to play in transforming our communities for the sake of the gospel.⁵

In recent years, NEXT has spent a great deal of energy focusing on the issue of racism — racism in the world and in the church. In Seattle, we heard from Tali Hairston, a brilliant black scholar, who never once used the word repentance, but taught us a great deal about what it looks like.

Repentance, in the Greek, *metanoia*, means literally "to turn around, or to change one's mind." But the Greek nuances this more than English. It is more than an intellectual change or a passive concept. To repent is to change the fullness of our being, to change our moral direction, to live in a distinct and different way. We say a prayer of confession every week. And it is always one of my favorite moments in worship, because to confess our sin before God is to say, "The way things are right now? This is not as good as it gets." I love our time of confession, but even that is not enough for true repentance.

I mentioned Tali a moment ago. In addressing over 600 people, he said it plainly. He said, "White people, if you want to make a difference, if you want things to change, you need to leave your guilt and your apologies in your seats. None of that is any good to me. Leave all of that in your seats, where there will be plenty of room for it, because what I need is for you to get up out of those seats and come stand by me. Come stand with me, close enough to

² Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens For a Reason*, page 113.

³ Karoline Lewis, "Fig Trees and Repentance," workingpreacher.org, accessed March 20, 2019.

⁴ Barbara Lundblad

⁵ For more information, visit nextchurch.net

see why my people are weeping. Close enough to catch our tears. Because if you do that, you will weep too. And that is the only thing that will ever drive the change we need to see.”⁶

That, I think, is as good an example of true repentance as I’ve ever heard. To repent is not simply to be sorry. To repent is to change the way we live so that the things we are sorry about lose their power in this world.

Repentance is at the core of discipleship. We cannot follow Jesus if we are not willing to change direction so that our steps match up with his. If we are not willing to head off toward a place we do not know, where we are the “strangers in a strange land.” Where we are perhaps more than a little uncomfortable, unsure of everything except the One who calls us by name and calls us ever toward himself into a new future.

Jesus starts the conversation about repentance by talking about those who have died. “Repent,” he says. “Repent, or else!” Those of a certain theological persuasion interpret this as a trumpet call to get right with God so we get ourselves into heaven. But it matters for reasons far beyond that. Like almost everything in Luke’s gospel, repentance shows us how to let God get more heaven into us. Here. Now. Today.

It’s an unlikely, but important, pairing of stories. The first few verses, the lesson in theodicy and the call to repentance, they remind us that discipleship is more than our best thinking, more than our best ideas. The second section of verses, the story of the fig tree, remind how God balances urgency and patience together. In their own ways, each is a call to action.

Discipleship tells us this: we may not always be able to explain suffering, but we are always able to engage it.⁷ To do as my friend Tali says, to get up our of seats and out among the suffering. The most faithful theology always has to step outside of walls of the church to breathe, acknowledging that once we’re out there, the odds are good Jesus is going to lead us down roads that make us nervous and around curves that leave the future unknowable. And he will expect us to follow.

The work is hard. The work will always be hard. The things most worth doing, often are. But thankfully, God is patient, and God will work even as we do — tending the soil around us, even going so far as to spread manure, not hesitating for a moment to get into the messiness of life so that we will brave enough to do the same. Because at the end of the day, this will always be true: We cannot explain everything about suffering. And life is not fair. But neither can we explain everything about the grace and patience and forbearance of our God who continues to insist that not all is lost, who continues to nudge us forward.

Earlier in this gospel, John the Baptist warns, “The ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down.”⁸ But God says — “Leave the ax down on the ground. Let me give it a bit longer. Even the most stubborn trees might yet blossom.”

When I served my first church in Ann Arbor, I inherited a small office with standard furniture, a temperamental furnace, and what appeared to be a stick carefully planted in a beautiful mosaic pot. Nothing about the stick gave any indication of life, but the pot was beautiful, and so I left it on the windowsill. For

⁶ These words are captured, not verbatim, but as fully as possible from notes taken during Tali Hairston’s keynote address at the NEXT Church National Gathering, March 11, 2019, in Seattle, Washington.

⁷ This line comes directly from Tom Are, Jr., and his sermon, (TITLE HERE), preached at Village Presbyterian Church on (DATE HERE).

⁸ Luke 3:9

over a year, the stick continued to be ... a stick. And I ignored it. Until one day, when seemingly out of nowhere, two buds opened, and I discovered the stick was really a dormant orchid. I had not once even bothered to imagine anything other than a stick. I did not think it was possible. It is what it is, I rationalized to myself. At least the pot it sits in is pretty. But I was wrong. By the grace of God, life always finds a way.

So maybe there will be figs this year. Figs in your life, and my life, and the life of the world. They are long overdue, aren't they? Maybe this will be the year for figs.⁹

⁹ This line belongs to Barbara Lundblad, from her sermon on this text, "Could This Be the Year For Figs?", preached March 18, 2001, for Day1.org.