

Repent Or Die! *or* There's Still Time for Transformation

Luke 13:1-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I have prepared two sermons today for you to consider. They are both derived from the biblical text we just heard from Luke 13. Here's the first sermon. Repent or die! Amen. (sit down)

I'm guessing that now you'll be a bit more interested in this second sermon. But no, it's not as short. Repentance lies at the heart of what it means to journey through the wilderness season of Lent. Unfortunately, a great many Christians still see repentance as a fire-and-brimstone message preached at revivals. That particular understanding of repentance comes as a warning of the hellish fate of the unsaved, followed by an altar call where fearful souls rush up to the front to escape eternal damnation.

You might be surprised to hear, therefore, that for all its warping by many hell-obsessed Christians, repentance is something progressive Christians have actually been talking about for a long time, but with a different focus and perspective, with hopes to reclaim this often-abused theological term. For example, at the other end of the theological spectrum, universalists who don't believe in an eternal place of damnation called hell, and that in the end God will reconcile all of creation to God's Self, still have much to gain in recognizing the need for repentance.

Going back to the original Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, from which we also get metamorphosis, we see that it's actually about having a change of heart and mind. **Repentance, then, is about transformation – not salvation. Or, as the apostle Paul phrases it in his letter to the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom. 12:2). Does that not lie at the very heart of a progressive approach to a life of faith?**

To make his point, the gospel writer Luke gives us a pair of stories that call us to repentance (vv. 1-5) and then a parable that illustrates the patience and love of God (vv. 6-9). In the first story, Luke writes that Jesus recounts an event where some Galileans came to make their sacrifices in the temple, but are instead slaughtered by Pilate's soldiers, profaning the altar with human blood. The implication in Luke's story is that **perhaps those who died deserved what they got as a punishment from God.** Jesus, however, denies that their suffering occurred because they were worse sinners than other people who were not killed. Instead of answering the question: *Why* were they killed? Jesus calls all his listeners to repent of their sinful ways. His purpose is not to condemn or punish, but to redeem. **Jesus disconnects the ancient understanding that interprets tragedy as a result of divine punishment for one's sinfulness.** Here's another way to put it. While certainly not all tragedy is the result of sin, sin can indeed lead to tragedy – but as a *consequence* of that sin, not because of divine punishment. **There is**

a huge difference between consequences and punishment. Jesus' listeners, and Luke's readers, have sinned (as we all have), so Jesus calls them, and us, to repent – to turn away from those things whose consequences may lead to suffering, harm or disaster for oneself or others.

In the second account, we learn that eighteen people had been killed when the Tower of Siloam in Jerusalem fell on them. Like the story of the Galileans slaughtered by Pilate, this story of the victims of a natural calamity led folks to ask: **Why did this bad thing happen to these particular people? Again, the implication is that God targeted these eighteen because of their sins.** Folks wondered if this was simply an accident or divine retribution. Or, as we might phrase it today, "Was this tragedy an intentional "act of God?" This continues to be a common question, especially in the face of nature's fury. For **there are still many people today who believe that God intentionally sends tornadoes, floods, fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, even volcanic eruptions to punish evildoers.**

Jesus again answers, No. And again, he uses the opportunity to call his listeners to repentance. So as we can see from a biblical perspective, repentance doesn't mean just feeling really, really sorry for the wrong things we've done. While that's a good start, otherwise we'd just be callous and heartless, **the repentance to which Jesus calls us to means to turn away from any sinful, damaging, and hurtful ways of acting and thinking. Repentance means turning towards the ways of God,** to the ways of love and compassion, the ways of peace and justice. The ways demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus himself.

In connecting this teaching of the importance of repentance with these two stories of sudden death – whether by murder or accident – Luke wants to warn us that our repentance must not be delayed. **Repentance needs to be an active, ongoing, daily attitude and approach toward life, rather than just an occasional act of confession and remorse.**

This warning to repent is intentionally followed by a **parable of the barren fig tree.** A fig tree has failed to bear fruit, and the land owner responds by saying that it should be cut down since it takes up ground that might be used more productively. But the gardener makes an alternative proposal, asking for one more year in which to personally nurture the tree so that it might bear fruit. He pleads: Give the fig tree another chance! Give it time to transform from being unproductive to bearing good fruit. We learn what many of us have experienced on a deeply personal level: **Sometimes it takes a long time, a lifetime, to transform into who God has created us to be.** We learn more in this parable than just about a patient God. We can learn something important about ourselves as well.

Let's put ourselves into the role of the person who owned the fig tree, judging that it deserved to be cut down because it was unproductive, unredeemable. Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, asks, **"How often do we label people unreachable and give up on them?** Look, we say, no figs, no fruit, useless. We communicate in word or action or inaction: cut them down, they are wasting soil that could be better utilized." **Conversely, how often have you or I felt written off, labeled unreachable, been cut down to size, dismissed or rendered invisible?** Through this parable, we are to learn that no human being gets to say when the time for transformation is up. "The two previous stories of the Galileans and the ones at Siloam reveal the reality that **the time for repentance, change, a turning and transformation is not infinite, but only God gets to say when time's up.**

Further, in this time between barrenness and fruit bearing, Jesus does not sit back and watch idly, counting the days until the ax will come down on the root. The gardener will tend to the fig tree by digging around it and putting fertilizer on it. Again, Duffield asks, "Who and what have you and I deemed beyond reach and unworthy of effort, concern or resources? What have you and I pronounced dead that God sees as ripe for new life? **What, and who, have you and I cut down to size that we should have been supporting, encouraging, and building up?"**

What we see as barren and dead, not worth our personal or congregational time and energy, Jesus sees as prime for transformation and new life. What a difference it could make if we could see others the way God's sees them. "Think of the power of being truly seen, regarded and thought worthy of others' time, attention and care. The gardener of this parable understands that power. Give me time. Let me dig and tend. Nurture and nourish, prune and water. Expect transformation, growth, and fruit. Then we'll see what happens. Time is not infinite, but time's not yet up. Don't cut it down just yet."

Every one of you, every single human being is a child of God. Everyone has a gift to use and share. Sometimes, you just need to dig a little bit more and a little bit longer to find it. Perhaps that which you or I have labeled as unreachable, impossible, and all but dead is ripe for radical, God-revealing transformation, growth, and new life. That's part of the promise of Easter, to which we are headed.

Yet, as we journey deeper into the season of Lent, it is a good time to do some digging, clearing away to make room for growth, certain that God is *with* us and that God is *for* us, wants so much for us to repent and be reconciled, and goes to such extraordinary lengths to reach us, to reach you!

Amen.

Resources:

Jill Duffield, 3rd Sunday in Lent, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 3-18-19.

Barbara Brown Taylor, "Life-Giving Fear", *Christian Century*, March 4, 1998.

Jirair Tashjian, *The Christian Resource Institute*, 2004.