

Martha C Langford
First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange TX
24 March 2019, Third Sunday of Lent
Luke 13:1-9

YOU-turns

As the season turns to Spring, at my house it's time to make the annual "Accounting of the Plants." The beautiful coleus and lavender plants that graced the front porch in October have gone on to the great flowerbed in the sky, while the Christmas Norfolk pine and one tenacious English ivy made it through their indoor ordeal.

In my family, I have a reputation as a "plant assassin." You could say that my record for house-plants has been less than stellar. Yet, hope springs eternal. So, I went to the Herb Society sale at Festival Hill, and now have a budding, indoor kitchen garden.

Seeing the picture on Facebook, my friend wrote, "Good luck."

I think she was talking to the plants.

Why do some survive while others die?

I think that this is part of the question that this crowd has for Jesus.

Jesus has encouraged them to interpret the signs of the time—and it seems like at least some folks have taken him up on it. They share a story that would have made the front page of the Galilee Gazette AND the Jerusalem Times— imagine it: "Pilate Slays Sacrificing Sinners" in 72-point type.

Luke doesn't tell us what the crowd is asking Jesus when they report this atrocity to him, but from Jesus' response we get the gist. The people have drawn a line of cause and effect between the Galileans' suffering and their relative state of sinfulness.

Have they read the signs correctly, Jesus?

Isn't this what Deuteronomy teaches?

Galilee was known to be a hotbed of rebellion—the historian Josephus records more than a dozen revolts that originated in the region. Could it be that these Galileans twisted the tiger's tail? Were they rightly put down as insurrectionists against the Roman order?

Did these Galileans somehow earn their fate?

Simmering behind this scene is an age-old division between city and country Jews—there is a hint of disdain for Galileans that we hear clearly in Luke's account of Pentecost. Astonished to hear the disciples speaking foreign languages, the cosmopolitan Jerusalem Jews ask, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" (Acts 2:7)

Jesus does not accept their reasoning or their prejudice. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered... they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” he asks. He then answers his own question: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Making sure they hear his point, Jesus shares his own headline-news: eighteen have been killed as the tower of Siloam fell. These dead were Jerusalemites—their neighbors and peers.

“Were they worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Jesus asks and again answers: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Scott Spencer asserts, “Jesus’ aim is not simply to challenge smug assumptions... [he] moves to shake everyone’s security... alert[ing] all to the necessarily destructive consequences of universal human sinfulness.”¹

Repentance is the answer—so that we all might live and die differently.

But what does repentance look like? In Luke’s gospel, John the Baptist has already spread the call to repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He told the crowds to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8) and warned them “every tree... that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9).

John describes the fruits— for the citizen: sharing one’s clothing with the poor ones and one’s food with the hungry ones; for the tax collector: taking only what is in the tax table; for the soldier: to cease using their power for illicit profit and to be satisfied with their wage.

These are deeds of compassion that mark our interdependence; deeds of righteousness that mark our relationships to God; deeds of justice that mark our relationships with our neighbors.

Jesus does not call the crowd a “brood of vipers” instead he tells them this parable: a fig tree that has come to maturity in years; yet, is still not bearing figs. There is an absentee owner—a frequent figure in Jesus’ parables—which reflects a real-life economic challenge in first century Judea.² The land owner has one focus—gaining profit from the land. To him, the math is simple; if the tree isn’t productive, the tree must go.

I can remember when my brother began farming the family land. He mended fences and reclaimed pastures into cultivated fields.

It was shocking to pull into the homestead and catch sight of a HUGE stack of firewood beside his small house. The wood came from one of the big hardwoods growing in the middle of Wooley—our large northwest pasture.

I was crushed that he had cut down such a beautiful tree but listened as he explained. The tree was competing with the crops for water. Nothing would grow within a twenty- or thirty-foot radius and that was making the field unprofitable.

He explained it using the calculus of farming, which had its eye firmly on the beauty of the yield.

Yet, in Jesus' parable, the fig tree has an advocate in the gardener. Perhaps, he says, all this tree needs is a little more time, a little more attention, one more season. "Let me dig around it and fertilize it really good. Have patience—give it a year to bear fruit before you declare it a lost cause."

The gardener wants to give the mystery of seed and soil more time, because he has intimate knowledge of the wonder of the seed. Seeds are created with all the information required to become what God intends it to become; this tree has been created to bear figs—and the gardener would nurture it in its purpose to give it the strength to yield a harvest.

We might wonder about this comparison that Jesus seems to make—human sinfulness compared to a barren fruit tree.

In her blog for the Christian Century, Tricia Gates Brown shares that, "few theological concepts are as mangled and misinterpreted as the concept of sin."³

She writes that sinfulness is at its heart is forgetting our identity as beings created in the image of God and bearing the breath of God.

"Sin," Brown asserts, "is a state characterized by being unconscious that we are united with God... that we are one with the ground of all being... Sin involves living out of this illusion, this state of separateness... from God, from others, and from the entire created order."⁴

Our "moral missteps" are symptoms, but the sin is spiritual amnesia. Brown continues, "You think you are a self-guarding, separate entity journeying through your life—with no choice but to look out for Number One, but this misses the mark. The stunning fact of the matter is that you are so much more than this; you are fully a piece of God journeying through this world. The purpose of your life is to come to realize it."⁵

To use the language of Jesus, we forget our created purpose. We live as fruit trees unaware of our physiological imperative to produce fruit.

As a would-be gardener, I recognize that cultivation is tricky business.

Examining my track record with plants, I've found that my error (most often) is ineptitude with watering. I also found that I am not alone. This year, I decided to give my kitchen garden a fighting chance and purchased a self-watering planter that tells you when to add water.

I also wanted to know more about indoor gardening—so I Googled it! After watching dozens of YouTube videos, I also purchased a sun lamp to give the plants the light needed to thrive. In a few short days, I've already noticed the plants turning their leaves towards the light.

This too is the miracle of seed and soil. Plants know to turn toward the source of flourishing and new growth.

And that—to me—is the work of repentance: turning ourselves toward the source of true flourishing and growth. Repentance is to become rooted in the ground of our being, to reorient our hearts and

minds and souls toward the light of God's countenance, to let the Master gardener heal our brokenness so that we might bear fruits of compassion and righteousness and justice.

As we listen to Jesus, we come to understand the need is urgent.

Perhaps philosopher and poet Henri-Frédéric Amiel says it best: "Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind."

Amen.

¹ Spencer, F. Scott. "Exegetical Perspective on Luke 13:1-9." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke*. Vol 2. Louisville: WJK, 2014. 29.

² Deffenbaugh, Daniel G. "Theological Perspective on Luke 13:1-9." *Feasting on the Word*. Yr C. Vol 2. Louisville: WJK, 2009. 94.

³ Brown, Tricia Gates. "Sin is about not knowing who we are." *CCBlogs Network*. www.christiancentury.org. 19 February 2019.

⁴ Brown.

⁵ Brown.