

Occasion: Third Sunday in Lent [C]

Date: 03-07-2010

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Title: Bearing the Fruit of Repentance

Introduction:

For some the tradition of reading the newspaper for their news is a longstanding tradition, especially the Sunday paper. When I was growing up, I used to like to read the comic section. The Peanuts cartoon strip, starring Snoopy and Charlie Brown were right at the top of the section. I also remember looking through all the different advertising inserts in the Sunday paper. As I got a little older, I would help find the coupons for the groceries and other items that we regularly got at the store. During baseball or football season, I liked to check the standings of all the teams to see who was at the top and heading for the playoffs. Of course, for some people, the newspaper was actually a source for news, be it international, national or local.

Setting:

When I read today's Gospel Lesson, I felt like I was reading a page right out of the "Jerusalem Times" of the first century. No, they didn't have newspapers back then, nor did they have the evening news on TV or news at the top of the hour on the radio. Back then, news spread the old fashioned way, by word of mouth, from person to person to person. I wonder what that did for the accuracy of the news?

In his Gospel, Luke tells us that two news stories had come to Jesus, a story about some **"Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices"** and another story about the **"eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them."** No doubt, these were news stories typical of the first century, but Jesus used them as the backdrop for teaching the people something very important. Knowing that news involving the tragedy of the sudden deaths of individuals would be the buzz discussed by people, – raising questions about why these deaths happened, how they could have been prevented, or what would be next, – Jesus responded to some of the buzz that people were discussing. Apparently, some were saying that one of the reasons these people were killed was an act of judgment by God. The assumption was that these people must have done something really bad that offended God, so tragedy befell them as an act of judgment. But, to each story, Jesus responded the same way, not speculating about the circumstances of their deaths, but teaching the people a valuable lesson to remember from what was known about their sudden, unexpected deaths: **"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."** While death may strike some people suddenly, unexpectedly, there is one certainty about death that is not unexpected, and that is the death awaits everyone. When it comes to death, it is not a question of "IF" we will die, but "WHEN" we will die. Jesus warns His listeners that for something as certain to happen in time as their own deaths, they should be prepared for that eventuality through genuine repentance and a life of faith.

Above all that one accomplishes and experiences during his lifetime, what is most important is his preparation for what comes after his life in this world ends and he enters into eternity. Someone placed a simple, yet in all truth extremely relevant, question on the bulletin board in the Parish Hall that sums it up quite well: **"Where will you spend eternity, smoking or non-smoking?"** While on the surface this may be a simple attempt at humor using the common question about cigarettes, the sad truth is, the very prospect of spending eternity in the **"smoking section"** is frightful. Jesus cautions His hearers of the importance of being prepared for death whenever it comes, for indeed, it may come suddenly and unexpectedly.

I. THE PARABLE OF THE UNFRUITFUL FIG TREE:

To underscore the importance of producing the fruit of genuine repentance in one's life, Jesus goes on to use a simple illustration, a parable, of which the point is clear and undeniable.

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" – *Luke 13:6-9*

A person plants a fruit tree for one reason, to eat the fruit of that tree. That's common sense. Now, what is so obvious and irrefutable in the natural world, Jesus wants His hearers to apply in their spiritual lives. God has called you out of this corrupt and condemned world to be His own. In His abundant grace, God has washed away your sins in Baptism, and He has joined you to the righteous life of Christ, that you may now stand before God as He created and recreated you to be – as holy, as righteous.

Having been so blessed by God, having been planted in the soil of Christ Jesus Himself, what fruit is growing on you? The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians:

⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, ⁷rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. – *Colossians 2:6-7*

Are your roots sinking deep into Christ, into the grace you have received? Are your roots drawing nourishment from the Word of God, that your faith is increasing in knowledge and truth? Are your roots firmly grounded in the faith, so that when temptation comes, you can resist the temptation, and not be moved by the deceptions and empty words of the devil? As the apostle Peter began his second letter, he wrote:

⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, brotherly kindness;

and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸**For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.** ⁹But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

¹⁰Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. – 2 Peter 1:5-11

What Jesus taught in the Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree, what Peter emphasized about the Christian life, is that God has saved us from corruption and judgment that we may produce the fruit of repentance, of turning away from corruption and that we may yield a life of godliness and love. Peter even emphasized this with the words, **“⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

If Jesus were to walk up to you today, would He find any fruit on your tree? If so, how long would He have to search for it? Would there be only a few pieces hidden among the leaves or buried deep inside that branches? Or would He find your tree covered with fruit?

II. THE LESSON OF THE UNFRUITFUL PEOPLE:

In the Epistle Lesson, the apostle Paul writes about a real life example of an unfruitful people. The Israelites that Moses lead out of slavery in Egypt were planted into the soil of God’s grace and God’s Covenant that was made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Listen as the apostle Paul describes how God planted the Israelites in the rich soil of His blessings and His Covenant:

¹I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. – 1 Corinthians 10:1-5

All the Israelites, as Moses lead them out of Egypt were “baptized” in that pillar of cloud that protected them from Pharaoh’s army as he approached them at the Red Sea and as they passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea. All the Israelites ate spiritual food and drank spiritual water from the rock. The whole nation was blessed. The whole nation was in the Covenant. But, what happened to this people so blessed by God? **“⁵Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.”** For all that God had done for them, there was no fruit of repentance, no fruit of faith in many of their lives. 99.9% of the adult Israelites that left Egypt died in the wilderness and never set foot in the Promised Land.

What had they done? Instead of repenting of sin, they dove headlong into corruption.

⁶Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷**Do not be idolaters** as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” ⁸**We must not indulge in sexual immorality** as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹**We must not put Christ to the test**, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰**nor grumble**, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. – 1 Corinthians 10:6-11

Where was the fruit of repentance? Where was the fruit of self-control, perseverance, and godliness? When temptation stood before them, the Israelites jumped right into the cesspool of corruption! Whatever was acceptable in the culture of the ungodly nations around them, they compromised God’s commandments and embraced in sin. As a nation, the Israelite fig tree was not very productive in the fruit of faith.

Conclusion:

So the apostle Paul concludes:

¹²Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. – 1 Corinthians 10:12-13

As long as we live in this corrupt flesh, as long as there is a devil in the world, there will be temptation to turn away from God and go our own way. Even as God graciously plants us in the soil of Christ Jesus Himself and all Christ has done for us as our Savior, temptation to turn away from all that God has done for us and to go after the pleasures and comforts of the world will come before us. The way to escape the temptation is to stand on the Word of God, to stand on what God has revealed to us as Truth so that we will not be deceived by what is a lie. Satan deceived Eve. Eve abandoned the Truth and fell for a Lie. Every temptation is a Lie, a Deception, to turn away from what God has said is Truth.

Are your roots sinking deep into Christ? Are you producing the fruit of repentance, of knowledge, of self-control, of perseverance, of godliness, of love. In the parable of the unfruitful fig tree, the gardener begged the owner of the tree for patience, that he might fertilize the tree and try for one more year to get fruit from the unfruitful tree. And that’s where Jesus ended the parable. He did not go on to say if the tree produced fruit the following year or if the tree was cut down. Perhaps Jesus did not end this parable because this parable is ended time and again in the lives of those who have been planted into Christ. My life, your life, will be an ending of the parable someday. What is your story? How will it end? AMEN