

We believe God is merciful. We believe God is just. Fair enough. But how does the good Lord deal out his mercy and justice? People have many different ideas on this subject, some of which do more harm than good.

Repentance is one of the key themes during Lent. It's a subject we revisit every year before Easter because it's directly related to our understanding of God's justice and mercy and our relationship to him and to one another, which was made whole through Christ's death and resurrection at Easter. That's what we're going to talk about this morning.

PRAYER

READ Luke 13:1-9

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." ⁶ And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And 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?' ⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

We just heard in the Gospel lesson these words: **Luke 13:1, “There were some present at that very time who told (Jesus) about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”** The religious leaders were challenging Jesus concerning a massacre that had happened in Jerusalem during a Passover Feast. Villagers from Galilee had just made their sacrifices in the Temple when they were killed by Roman soldiers, an act which desecrated the Temple. The religious leaders wanted to know where he thought God was in this.

Jesus responded, **Luke 13:2, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?”**

Apparently, the religious leaders blamed those who were killed for their own deaths! They must’ve been terrible sinners, they had concluded.

So Jesus challenged their use of human logic concerning spiritual things. Did they really think bad things only happened to bad people, and good things only happened to good people?

Jesus continued, giving an example of his own: **Luke 13:4, “(How about) those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?”**

Pontius Pilate had used money originally intended for maintenance of the Temple in Jerusalem to build the tower in Siloam. When it collapsed, the Jews made the assumption this was a sign that God hated him as much as they did, and that He cast judgment on the Jews who worked for him. “Served them right,” they said among themselves.

Earlier from the Old Testament we heard the words of God through the prophet Ezekiel. God said, **Ezekiel 33:13, "I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die."**

God doesn't have a point system like teachers do. You know, for every good deed you do, you get points you can use for treats, extended free time, or to make up for bad behavior. Nope. With God we can't carry forward points from yesterday. You did good today? That's great. Keep it up, every day. And be sure you never do wrong, for one single sin will bring down everything you've ever done that was right! That's what I'm reading here.

We also heard God say through Ezekiel, **Ezekiel 33:11, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live..."** This is God's call to repentance. That's what repentance means, that is, to "turn," to reverse direction, to turn around, to stop doing what we are doing, that is, those things that crushed our hearts and drove a wedge between us and God and one another.

The Jews weren't hearing anything new when Jesus said to them, **Luke 13:3, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."** But it was a reality check. He was saying to them, you enjoy lots of power and wealth, but you know better than to believe that those things which are outside of us have anything to do with our relationship with the Lord, which is about what's happening in here (in our hearts). In other words, because you're rich doesn't mean God approves of what you're doing.

With that in mind Jesus told them a parable, that they might understand what a true relationship with God looks like. He said, **Luke 13:6-7a, "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And 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?'"⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"**

The vineyard of fig trees is the world, a world filled with sinners and believers. God is the "man" in the parable. He was looking for fruit in the orchard, in the life

of a particular individual—perhaps you or me—but he came up empty-handed. Jesus is the merciful vinedresser.

Jesus said, **Luke 13:7b-9, (The man (God) said,) CUT IT DOWN. Why should it use up the ground?’⁸ And he (Jesus) answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can CUT IT DOWN.’”**

Notice that the words **“cut it down”** bookends or frames the statement, **“Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.”** This is the key statement in the parable, that is, that the barren fig tree needs to be smothered with manure, that is, fertilized.

What the parable means is that God wants to judge the whole world for its evil. But Jesus is hopeful, for his love of humanity knows no bounds. He sees every man and woman as redeemable, every life worth saving and becoming a blessing to God. All he needs to do is smother these lives with... manure! But the manure Jesus is talking about is not cow dung!

We read in **Leviticus 17:11 “that the life of the flesh is in the blood.”** Jesus fertilizes our lives with blood, his blood, the blood He shed on the Cross. His blood is the fertilizer of life for all people, for the whole world, for you and me.

Twice Jesus gave the call to repentance: **Luke 13:3,5, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”** This is for everyone, righteous and sinners alike, “for no one is righteous, no not one” (Romans 3:10). But just as the call to repentance is for everyone, so too forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus is for everyone. This word fills us with a sense of hopefulness and joy in our hearts. This is the source of the fruit God is looking for.

I can’t get over the sense of hopelessness and anger in people I meet on the street. Even fellow Christians often strike me this way. Sure everyone’s okay until the subject of the political race comes up, or an issue closer to home, like their

relationship with a child or a spouse or a coworker, and then the façade comes down. So much anxiety and frustration, bitterness and distrust, sadness and melancholy.

But Jesus is our faithful vinedresser. We were once dry, fruitless trees, but he's watered us with the holy waters of Baptism, he's fed us with his body and blood at his Table, and he's nourished us with the proclamation of his Word.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us think of ourselves this way: We are trees filled with fruit in the orchard of God. If your life feels dry, if your heart is filled with anger, pride, and jealousy, repent and receive Christ's nourishment for your soul. Your sins have been forgiven and you are a child of God.

Let go of all those things that crush your spirit. And now that your life is whole in the love of God, consider the fruit the Lord has brought forth from your heart, the fruit of the Spirit—his love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

And give thanks for that fruit and look for ways to share it with the people in your life.

This week, my friends in Christ, let us give thanks for God's mercy, that he accepts our repentance and nourishes us with the blood of Jesus.

This week let us look for ways to share the fruit of God with the people around us.

And this week let us look for opportunities to share the good news of God's work in us with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.