

Lent 3 / March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Lent is a season of repentance and all three of our lessons have repentance at their heart. Ezekiel is commissioned as a watchman for the house of Israel; watching not for external threats, but warning the people against the sin in their hearts and its manifestation in their lives. Repentance is to turn from evil and walk in the Lord’s “statutes of life.” In our lesson from 1 Corinthians, Paul holds up the sad example of ancient Israel in the wilderness, who refused to obey the Lord, continuously turned away from His commands and gave into temptation, as often as they were put to the test. Repentance is to resist evil inclinations, by turning to the Lord for strength in time of testing. In our gospel, Jesus tells the parable of a fruitless fig tree, which will be cut down and burned, if it does not produce fruit in season. Good fruit is a sign of repentance. Jesus said, “*you will recognize them by their fruits.*” The gardener seeks more time to nourish the tree in hope of bringing it to good health. Good fruit comes from a healthy tree.

Good fruit doesn’t make a tree healthy. An unhealthy tree cannot make itself produce good fruit. The tree must be made healthy to make good fruit. Repentance is not simply abstaining from sin and doing good things. Repentance is to live with God in a relationship of faith and love. Good fruit comes from a good relationship with God. In Jesus’ parable the tree does not make itself healthy. The gardener seeks to make the tree healthy, by applying water and nutrients. In the same way it is God who produces the fruits of repentance in our lives, by opening our heart to faith through the gospel of Jesus, and nourishing our faith through word and sacrament. Repentance is to receive God’s mercy through faith in Jesus. Repentance is to daily turn to God for forgiveness, by returning to the promise of our baptism. Repentance is to seek His Spirit’s guidance each day by returning to the word. Repentance is to live in and through Christ.

We naturally think of repentance as doing good and not sinning. God wants us to do good! The Lord says to Ezekiel that if the wicked gives up his wicked ways and does good he will live. God doesn’t want us to sin! He says, if the righteous give up righteous ways and does evil, he will suffer the consequences of his sins. But looking deeper, we must ask what would motivate the wicked to turn from sin and do good; and what would cause the righteous to turn from good and do evil? Because, the fruits are an effect rather than a cause. The wicked might turn from evil to avoid punishment, but what would cause a believer to turn from good and do evil? The only thing that causes believers to sin is turning away from the Lord.

When we sin, we turn away from the Lord. When we turn away from the Lord, we sin. Sinful actions are always an effect of turning away from the Lord. Turning away from the Lord is the cause of sin. Sin is a sign that we need to return to the Lord, seeking forgiveness and empowerment to walk in His love. Conversely, the only thing that can cause a wicked person to give up his or her evil ways, is to first turn to the Lord for the mercy of forgiveness. Repentance is not simply ceasing to do bad and instead doing good. Repentance first and foremost, is to live with God in a relationship of peace in the forgiveness of our sin.

People can modify their behaviour because of external pressure. People can stop doing bad things, because of fear of punishment, or simply because they no longer are able to do those things. I remember a criminologist saying that the most effective cure for criminal behaviour is old age. Martin Luther observed that there are people who refrain from sinful behaviour, only because their circumstances prevent it. However, they would happily engage in those behaviours, if they could get away it. Behaviour modification may pass for repentance, but its not Christian repentance.

Repentance is more than modifying our outward behaviour. Repentance is a change in our hearts in relation to God, so that not only do we turn away from sin, we don’t want to sin in the first place. Repentance is not turn away from sin to avoid punishment. Repentance is not wanting to sin, because the Lord is in our heart and we would not want to break His heart, by doing things that would grieve His Holy Spirit. Ancient Israel sinned grievously, because their hearts were far from the Lord. The Lord gives us the heart of His love is Christ Jesus. Repentance is to respond to the Lord’s love by turning to Him in faith and faithfulness.

On the surface, repentance seems like a law word. If someone tells us to repent, we either feel anger (“What business do you have to tell me to repent, worry about your own sins”) or fear (“I will repent because, I don’t want to go to hell. Tell me what to do to avoid hell”). Who wants to go to hell! Even if we don’t love God, we don’t want to go to hell. “Just tell us what we have to do!” However, wanting to avoid hell is not repentance. Repentance is responding to God’s love in Christ with faith and faithfulness. When Jesus came to Peter after Peter had denied Him three times, Jesus didn’t threaten him with hell. Instead, Jesus asked Peter, *“Do you love me?”* Jesus loved Peter. Jesus loves us! Repentance is to receive God’s love in Christ Jesus.

Repentance is a gospel word. When God calls us to repent, He is calling us to Himself for forgiveness. When Jesus says *“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,”* He is not threatening us with death and damnation. We already have that because of our sin and sinfulness. He is calling us Himself in faith that we may receive forgiveness, have the condemnation of sin and death lifted from our heads and receive the Spirit to guide us in paths of life. Repentance is trust in God’s mercy in Christ Jesus. Repentance is not fear of punishment. Repentance is responding to God’s love by not wanting to hurt His heart and grieve the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. Repentance is the holy desire to please Him with our lives for the sake of His love expressed fully in Christ crucified.

We all need to repent. We all need to turn to the Lord through faith in Christ as our Saviour, the day we first believed and everyday for the rest of our lives. Conversion to faith in Jesus is the first repentance. On the day of Pentecost three thousand responded with faith when they heard Peter say, *“Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* We all sin. We all need to turn to Jesus. The result of sin is death. Whether we die of natural causes, or die like the Galileans murdered by Pilate or the Judeans who died in an accident, we will all die. Death is the universal proof of sin. Death shows our need to turn to the Lord for forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. Jesus said, *“I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live even though he dies.”* Jesus gives life through the forgiveness of sins. We repent by believing in Him as our Saviour and receiving Him in our hearts as Lord.

We always need to repent. As long as we live in this flesh and in this world, we will sin in our thoughts, in our words and in our actions. We will be affected by sinful desires, thoughts and influences. Repentance is to turn to the Lord for forgiveness as often as we fall and whenever we are tempted. When Jesus calls us to repent, He calls us to Himself to receive mercy and grace to help in our time of need. He calls us to Himself in the water of our baptism, through which He daily drowns our sinful nature and gives the Holy Spirit to empower us to walk in newness of life. He calls us to Himself in the bread and wine of Holy Communion through which He forgives our sins and nourishes our faith through the gift of His body and blood. He calls us to Himself in His word through which He leads us along paths of righteousness and assures us of His love, our forgiveness and our place in His Father’s kingdom. God bless us with His Spirit that we may live with Him in faith and faithfulness in time and for eternity. In Jesus’ Name. Amen