

The Fruit of Repentance

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on March 24, 2019

Luke 13:1-9

1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’ 6 Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” 8 He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” ’

In our gospel reading this morning, we encounter two stories of tragedy and a parable about a fig tree; all which are united by the theme of repentance. While this passage of Scripture is quite capable of speaking for itself, it is best understood in the context of the entire gospel of Luke where the theme of repentance is fully developed. For this reason, let us review the entire gospel and examine the various contexts in which repentance arises and then use this knowledge to help us come to a better understanding of what Jesus is saying when he calls us to repent.

Starting at the beginning, Luke’s gospel opens with the birth of John the Baptist whom the angel Gabriel said would bring many back to the Lord and whom his father said would bring the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. Then we are told the story of Jesus’ birth.

Very quickly we move into Luke chapter three where we find John at the Jordan river preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, in fulfillment of his father’s and Gabriel’s prophecy. In his message to the crowds John first asks them who warned them to flee from the coming judgement? Next, he warns them that their racial heritage does not exempt them from the call to repentance, and then he calls them to produce fruit that testifies to their repentance as “the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Notice the great similarities between these words of John that appear at the beginning of the gospel and the words of Jesus that we read

that occur in the middle of the gospel. Before moving on, it is worthy of noting that John goes on to define the fruit of repentance as radical sharing, the demonstration of integrity in the market place, and being content with what we have.

The next time we encounter the word “repent” is in Luke chapter five. By this time Jesus is well into his public ministry and the leaders of the people are questioning Jesus’ decision to eat with tax collectors and sinners. In response, Jesus says that he has not been sent to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Then in chapters ten and eleven, Jesus speaks words of woe over the different regions of the country for their lack of repentance in light of the mighty miracles they had witnessed. Adding to their condemnation Jesus mentions how certain Gentiles known for their corruption had greater spiritual sensibilities than God’s chosen people.

This brings us to our reading for today where it is clear that those to whom Jesus is speaking have not recognized their need for repentance. Like the people to whom John the Baptist spoke, who thought they were justified in the eyes of God because they were children of Abraham, and like the Pharisees in chapter five who saw the need of the tax collectors and sinners to repent, but, could not see their own need to repent, the people to whom Jesus was speaking were unaware of their spiritual condition.

This statement is likely true for a couple of reasons. For starters it is highly probable that the conversation they raised was not out of a genuine desire to gain insight into the things of God, but, to see if they could provoke Jesus into saying something that they could use to accuse him before the religious leaders or before the governor, Pontius Pilate. As Luke tells us in chapter six, the Pharisees were very disturbed with Jesus’ teaching and his growing influence and they had started plotting against him. As a result, in almost every chapter of Luke to this point there is some story about how the Pharisees are trying to find fault with Jesus. No doubt, this story is a continuation of this trend.

Secondly, in the response Jesus gives it would follow that those telling the story had an underlying belief that the reason the Galileans died at the hands of Pilate or the other people died at the tower of Siloam was because they were bad people and God was judging them. In contrast to this popular thinking that many in those days possessed, that is the belief that those to whom bad things happen are bad, and those to whom good things happen are righteous, Jesus counters by saying, “unless you repent, you will all perish.” In other words, Jesus was saying to those around him that they were just as needy of repentance and the danger of

judgement was just as real for them as the people in the tragedies.

Continuing on with our journey through Luke and his use of the word, “repent,” the next time the word “repent” occurs is in Luke fifteen where we find the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. The refrain in these parables is that “there is more rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” This is followed by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in chapter sixteen, where the rich man while being tormented in hell calls out to Abraham to send Lazarus back to his family to call them to repent so they don’t end up in the same place. In chapter seventeen, repentance is connected to forgiving those who trespass against us. Finally in the last chapter of Luke, chapter twenty four, after the resurrection and just before Jesus ascends to heaven, he tells the disciples, “This is what was written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” Notice how this message is exactly the same as what John spoke to the people at the Jordan River at the beginning of the gospel.

Putting all of this together, when Jesus tells those to whom he was speaking, in Luke chapter thirteen, “unless you repent, you will all perish” we can conclude many things. First and foremost, this call was meant for his hearers. However, just in case the point is not clear, there are four other occasions prior to this story where God’s people and the biblical scholars of the day are rebuked for their failure to comprehend their own need to repent. Applying this to our lives, we can see that Jesus’ call to repent is first and foremost meant for us. After all, repentance must begin with God’s people before it can go to the nations. For if we don’t repent, then what is the value of our testimony?

Secondly, addressing the question of what it means to repent, the angel Gabriel, in Luke chapter one gives us a very simple definition. It means to turn away from being servants of self and to turn back to being servants of God. Adding all the other imperatives that we find connected with repentance throughout the gospel of Luke, repenting means professing that Jesus is the Christ whom God sent to die on the cross and to rise on the third day. Repentance means forgiving the sins of others as we expect to be forgiven. Repentance means a sacrificial level of sharing and a demonstration of integrity in our dealings with others. Repentance means being content with what we have. Repentance also means embracing the prodigal love of God and allowing ourselves to be transformed by this love; which ironically may be the hardest thing to do in this list.

However, as hard as it may be to do, it must be done. As Jesus tells us, repentance

is imperative to our well being. It is more important than getting an education, having a family, or finding fulfilling employment. It is more important than eating, breathing, and getting rest. For if we don't repent, Jesus tells us we face the reality of physical death, like those killed by Pilate and those who died when the tower of Siloam fell. If we don't repent we also face spiritual death, like the rich man faced in the flames of hell. This is why we need to repent.

However, in the face of this prospect of severe judgement; especially when we consider our tendency to remain stuck in our self centered ways, Jesus leaves us with words of hope as he tells the parable of the fig tree. While on a first read it only seems like a parable of strong judgement, consider the following. The man who plants the tree represents God. The gardener is Jesus. We are the tree. Now, how many trees do you know that decide whether or not they are going to bear fruit? I suspect not too many. This is because a trees' ability to bear fruit is not determined by the tree itself. For reasons known only to God, a tree bears fruit or does not bear fruit according to the mind and wisdom of the Almighty.

Now, from the parable Jesus told, we know that God's desire is that the tree would bear fruit. We also know that a fruitless life will not be tolerated. While this is a great cause for concern for us trees who are stuck in a spell of fruitlessness, the parable reminds us that our ultimate hope rests in the reality that we are God's trees, planted in God's garden, tended by Jesus, the compassionate gardener who calls for mercy and labours in love confident that his tending and fertilizing will produce the desired result. As the Apostle Peter writes, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." And so, at the end of the day it is this promise that we can cling to as we do the best that a tree can do on its own strength and through its own will to bear the fruit of repentance.

At the end of the day, this is the promise and the mystery that we can ponder as we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus towards the cross. So as we begin another week in this sacred season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving may we, through the grace of God, see the light and turn towards the Son. In this season of Lent, may we be a repentant people whose lives bear fruit, causing the angels to rejoice as God's glory is revealed.