

Sunday, Mar. 7, 2021
Sermon Series: Love in Action

JMaking Room When Others Let Us Down
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Luke 13:1-9 NRSV

Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

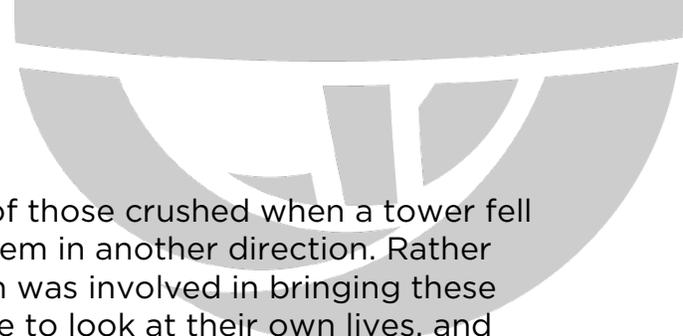
⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Grace and peace to you from God our creator and from Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Beloved children's book author, Dr. Suess was in the headlines this week. You may have heard about it. Of course, Dr. Suess has been dead since 1991, but his legacy of whimsical children's literature lives on. And this is where a few of those legacies have drawn attention. After review, the organization that oversees his estate decided to stop publishing six books that played into outdated racist stereotypes. An Asian character was drawn with horizontal lines for eyes, a pointed woven hat, and carrying a rice bowl with chopsticks wherever he went. Another book made references to Jewish people that could be seen as antisemitic. A few people have cried foul, claiming this is just one more example of "cancel culture". But here's the thing, no one is forcing the organization that protects the reputation and estate of Dr. Suess to do this. They have examined the impact these few books may have on the people who read them and decided that the message doesn't reflect how other people should be portrayed. In essence, they are repenting - going in another direction.

Today's gospel is all about repentance and new directions. When Jesus is asked by a crowd about a couple of recent local tragedies - the slaughter of Galilean





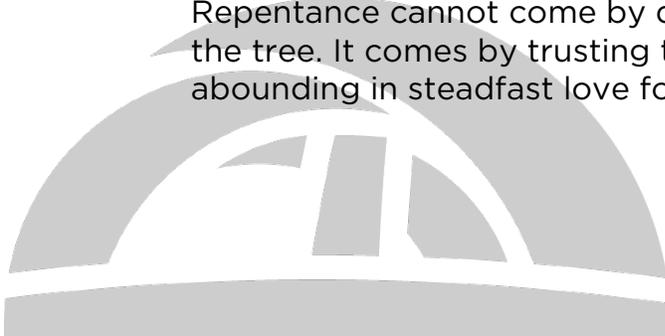
pilgrims at the hands of Pilate, and the deaths of those crushed when a tower fell on them in Jerusalem - Jesus is quick to lead them in another direction. Rather than feeding their curiosity about how much sin was involved in bringing these tragedies on these people, he directs the people to look at their own lives, and the ways that any of our lives can lead to life or death, not just physically, but spiritually.

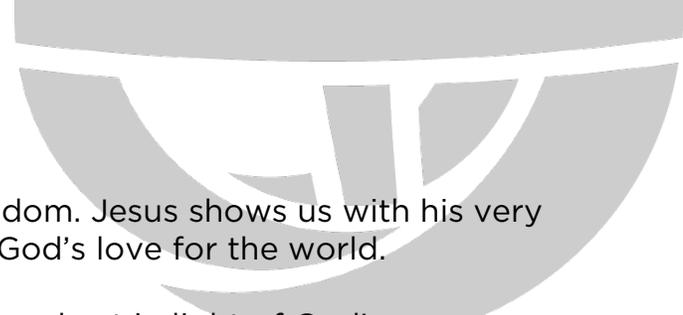
Jesus uses these stories as examples to remind the crowd that life is fragile and finite. The people who died were no different than those he was talking to in the crowd. They just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. The crowd, nor we, Jesus would say, should attribute good fortune with God's special favor. Instead, these events point us to being purposeful with the fragile, finite life we've been given.

Jesus says twice, "Unless you repent, you'll all perish just like they did". Luke highlights the urgency of repentance in relationship to God more than any of the other gospels. John the Baptist called for repentance early on, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance...Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees, every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." It sounds a lot like that impatient vineyard owner in the gospel this morning, right?

We may recoil at such language of judgment, but Jesus wants to emphasize that there is an urgency to this life. What we do with this fragile gift matters. Bearing fruit, living in harmony with the ways of God is not a matter to delay. Luke's gospel makes an impassioned case that following Jesus leads to a changed life, a new direction. This is about discipleship, about casting our lot with Jesus, taking up a cross, following Jesus daily with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. An practice of repentance binds our lives to the power of God, who creates, restores, and gives life, and who holds both justice and grace within God's power. To practice repentance is to reject other forces and powers that would persuade us to see the world other than the way God has intended it, and to work toward the healing and restoration of God's good creation. As Luther Seminary professor Matt Skinner points out repentance isn't a "morose expression of piety" that should make us feel worse about ourselves than before, but a practice that "arcs toward joy."

As urgent as the need is to repent, it is a practice that is steeped in grace. Even as the ax is laying at the root of the tree ready to chop it down, or the owner is ready to pull the barren fig tree out of the vineyard, there is a gardener, whose patience makes room when we are slow to change. A savior who is willing to do ALL that is necessary to work in us and through us, so that we will bear fruit. Repentance cannot come by demand, just as fruit will not grow by threatening the tree. It comes by trusting that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for you. Jesus, the gardener shows us the way of





turning toward God and the ways of God's kingdom. Jesus shows us with his very life, the extent to which God will go to express God's love for the world.

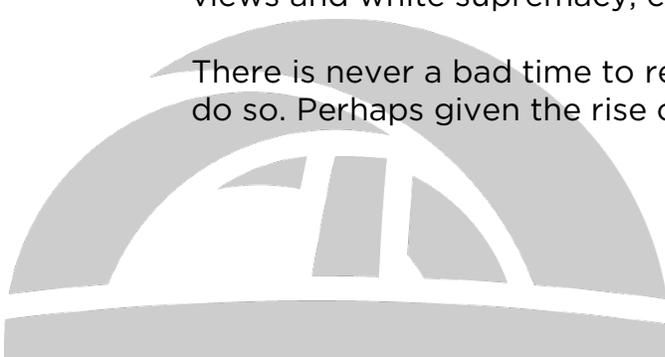
When we repent, we change the ways we think and act in light of God's grace and mercy in Jesus. We see our lives and the world from a different vantage point and allow ourselves to be persuaded that our life and our joy are inextricably connected to how others experience the world. We do not repent to turn toward a punishing and vengeful God, but to experience life and hope and love in the mercy of God who hung on a cross and asked for God's forgiveness for his executioners even as he suffered at their hands. There is an urgency to repent because everyday we don't is a missed opportunity to live in the joy and freedom of God and to share that joy and freedom with others.

On Ash Wednesday, many of you came through the line in the parking lot to receive the imposition of ashes. It was a chance to participate in a ritual of repentance. This year was also an opportunity to share in life in ways that we haven't been able to in a year. As a Buick pulled into my line during the mid-morning session, I saw Carol behind the wheel. Carol lives alone in a senior coop. She has neighbors and friends nearby, but I figured it has still been a difficult year for her. I asked her how she had been doing during the pandemic. She said, "Oh, Pastor Jason, every day I wake up and the first thing I do is thank God for the day, and for the people in my life, and for the blessings, all the blessings I have, and I ask God to give me the strength to do what he would have me do that day. And then I have devotions. That helps me get through every day with joy."

Jesus calls us to the kind of repentance that Carol practices - a practice of turning toward God and naming what God provides us each day with gratitude, a practice that calls us to be of use to God, to bear fruit in the vineyard, and reflect Christ's love and grace in the ways we live our lives each day.

Maybe that means that we intentionally look for the small blessings among the big struggles in our lives. Maybe it means that we look for ways to be grace and hope to someone we see could use a blessing in their life.

Sometimes that means we do the hard work of naming the ways our actions have harmed others or acknowledge that what may have been acceptable at one time should not be acceptable today-especially when what is not acceptable provides advantage to us and hardship to another. Like, the Suess organization pulling children's books that in one way or another promoted racist views and white supremacy, even if it was not the primary aim of the book.



There is never a bad time to repent, but remember Jesus expresses an urgency to do so. Perhaps given the rise of white nationalism, and race-based violence, it was



the right time to “cancel” these racially inflammatory children’s books just as it may be the right time to find some more intentional time to tend our relationship with God, or examine how our actions and words impact others. As followers of Jesus, we are called to examine our lives in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and as Luther says, “daily die to sin and rise with Christ.”

Lent is a season that leans heavily toward the practice of repentance, of examining our lives in light of Jesus and turning in the direction toward the ways of God. May your journey with Jesus always bear fruit, and when it does not; Christ comes to meet us with the grace to turn us again from death to new life. Amen.

