

## **Metanoia: The Practice of Repentance and Cultivating the Fig Tree**

Third Sunday in Lent | Luke 13:1-9 | March 20, 2022

Samm Melton-Hill | Highlands Lutheran Church | Denver, CO

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### **Sun. Mar. 20 — Third Sunday in Lent**

#### ***Cohen's Baptism***

#### **Readings**

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63:1-8 (1)

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

#### **Prayer of the Day**

Eternal God, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your word and obey it, and bring your saving love to fruition in our lives, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

#### **Gospel Acclamation**

Jesus began | to proclaim,

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven | has come near. (Matt. 4:17)

**Color:** Purple

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### **Repent or Perish | Luke 13:1-9 | NRSV**

13 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."

### **The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree**

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 around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

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## **Metanoia: The Practice of Repentance and Cultivating the Fig Tree**

As many of you know, I played soccer all throughout my childhood and into college. Soccer was a central part of my formation and where many of my own childhood memories rest. And so maybe it is no surprise that after reading this text, I came back to a deeply buried memory from my high school soccer team.

So to set the scene: it is a hot and humid Missouri summer day. We are playing on turf, so it's extraordinarily hot and miserable in the way only the midwest can be during the summer months. We had started practice with a long run through the woods, returned to the field to be met with cones laid out indicating more running and conditioning was in our future. Now, I don't know everyone's athletic experiences, but there is a certain kind of sinking feeling that you feel when you realize a practice is only going to consist of running. It's the anxiety that immediately follows your coach yelling "get on the line!"

So here we are, a high school women's soccer team, truly miserable during practice, worn out, worn down, low morale, and as we are nearing the end of practice, we are standing in these military-like lines so that we can do push-ups, situps, and such. And then all of the sudden from behind me I hear a voice say something like, "What's the point of this, this isn't fair, we've been winning all season!" Oh no. Then another teammate chimes in, "yeah, why are we being punished, we didn't do anything wrong!" I have to admit that I shared their sense of injustice, but wasn't brave enough to say it to a coach. And sure, they were right, this is the kind of practice that happens after a terrible loss, not one that comes in the midst of a nine game winning streak. It didn't seem to matter, because I can assure you that practice did not end on time that day.

In response to our Gospel reading this morning, this memory arose for me because as humans, we have this keen ability to point out when things aren't fair. From preschool, we get punished for doing the same thing that other kid did over there. What's with that? It's not fair that we have an early bedtime and friends don't. Right? Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort reflects on this phenomenon too, saying that "It never ceases to amaze me the way kids keep an internal ledger. When it comes to who did what and how we responded and who lost screen time or who got more or did or did not do their chores or worksheets—somehow they are meticulous at keeping track of

perceived slights.”<sup>1</sup> I’m convinced that we never really grow out of these childlike tendencies. Rev. Kim-Kort goes on to wonder what this is really all about. She wonders is it about “vigilance towards keeping the scales balanced. Is it really about fairness? Could it also be the need for explanation? For order? For simply making sense of the world?”<sup>2</sup> I add to her series questions: is it so we can avoid looking inward on ourselves? Is it because it’s easier to point out the wrongs of others? Is it because we feel that we ‘deserve’ better or are better than ‘those other people’?

There is something embedded in us from childhood that allows us to have this attitude, or this eye towards the perceived wrongs of others. So much so that these feelings of injustice are exactly what the crowd is asking Jesus about in our Gospel text today. As readers, we come to this passage in the middle of Lent, as Jesus is turning towards Jerusalem, approaching the cross. Luke as a whole, writes about Jesus’ miracles and offers a series of familiar parables. And this morning we land in chapter 13, where Jesus is offering answers and opinions to crowds of people on a number of different topics. Here, in the midst of these questions, someone reports to Jesus that Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor, has killed some of the people from Galilee, conveying the particular brutality of the empire towards these people.

And Jesus responds quite pointedly, maybe even a bit sharply. He first makes it clear that these Galileans nor those who died by the falling of the tower, did not die because they are worse sinners, or worse people than anyone else. This is the first message we hear from Jesus and it is an important one: that the sins of the victims is not what causes the death and suffering of the Galileans.<sup>3</sup> And this is often the message we take from this passage in Luke, but there is a secondary message embedded in this story as it is paired with the “parable of the unfruitful fig

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<sup>1</sup> Mihee Kim-Kort. [“Living by the Word: March 20, Lent 3C \(Luke 13:1-9\).”](#) *Christianity Today*. 22 February 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Further, atonement theology: The third view\* is that of classical Lutheran theology. This position as set down in the Formula of Concord (1580) does not attempt to resolve what the Holy Scriptures state concerning atonement and election. For Lutheran theology the atonement is universal and the election is limited to certain individuals chosen by God in Christ without any respect to any work or merit on their part.”

David Scaer. [“The Nature and Extent of the Atonement in Lutheran Theology.”](#) *Concordia Seminary*.

tree” in which Jesus focuses on the importance of repentance. Jesus ends this first section by calling the crowd into this practice.

Sometimes the word “repentance” comes with a lot of baggage, especially for those who might come from other Christian denominations, or are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Often times, the word has a kind of edginess to it; it can sting a bit. But, it’s one of those words that gets lost in the English translation. In the Greek text, this word is “metanoia” (met-uh-NOI-uh), which means “to change one’s way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion.” It is sometimes described as a “transformative change of heart.” Repentance, metanoia, is a spiritual practice, and not a simple one. It often requires time for deep reflection and prayer, an attitude of humbleness, and actions towards reconciliation.

This, I think, is the underlying message of today’s texts. While we could dive deeper into the atonement theology, become distracted by the injustices of Pilate’s actions, or we could begin pointing fingers to those we see doing harm, Jesus instead invites us inward. And we acknowledge that naming injustice, calling it out, does have an important place in our lives at times, but here, we are receiving further instruction for leading a spiritual life. Here, Jesus reminds the crowd, reminds us, of our own imperfect humanness. Jesus calls us into a deeper relationship with him and with God through the practice of repentance.

And so yes, that first message is important. We first learn that repentance is not necessary to experience God’s love. And we see how this is true of our own tradition; there is no repentance necessary for baptism. The love and grace of God is given freely, it is always there, regardless of our mistakes and wrongdoings.

We know, we believe, that repentance is not necessary to experience God’s love, but instead it is something that God invites us into. By being in relationship with God, by knowing Jesus, we are offered this opportunity at practicing, not simply sewing, repentance. We are called into the practice of metanoia. As is often true with parables, we are offered some instructions or insight into how we might begin to become spiritually transformed.

Jesus is reminding us that regardless of what is happening in the world, it is important for us to have a heart and mind towards spiritual transformation, with a humble attitude, and the goal of reconciliation. In this section, Jesus says to the crowd, that when it seems easy to get stuck in a

loop of anger and pointing fingers towards others, instead, focus on your relationships with others. Know that in God, you are called and empowered to seek right relationship with the divine, the self, your community, and the Earth.

Professor Ronald Allen reinforces this. He writes that “in the Bible, repentance is much larger and often contains a corporate [or community] element. Indeed, repentance refers to individuals and communities turning away from things that violate God’s purposes (such as idolatry, injustice, and exploitation) and turning towards faithful living centered in worship of...God and in the practice of justice, mutual commitment, and other values of living in covenant [with one another].” In this story, “Luke signals that repentance is an essential step in the journey of the community towards [the kingdom of God].”<sup>4</sup> Jesus is reinforcing this as he speaks to the crowd.

This message is intended for this season of Lent. This parable, often titled “the parable of the unfruitful fig tree,” tells us about a landowner who goes to check on his garden and it is here that he sees this fig tree that hasn’t produced anything for three years. And so understandably, he turns to the gardener and asks him to cut it down. It’s of no use to him right now. It’s not doing what it is meant to do, so he wants it gone. But, the gardener asks the landowner to give it just another year. The gardener thinks that maybe with some special attention, some careful waiting, and fertilizer, the tree could become healthier and start growing some fruit. He’s not ready to give up on it quite yet. It’s a bit funny that this parable ends so abruptly. We don’t actually know what the landowner decided, but I am hopeful that he trusted in his gardener’s expertise.

This little parable gives us some simple instructions for that process of repentance. It takes time, attention, and a supportive community around you. The practice of repentance is so much more than “oops, sorry I messed up God.” There are a number of other spiritual traditions that offer some instructions for repentance and reconciliation as well. As Christians, we are not the only one that believes in the transformative power of repentance and reconciliation. I personally like the definition that many Buddhist traditions offer, in which repentance is described “as a continual process of sincere self-reflection and self-discipline.”

Another that comes to mind is the practice of twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Al-Anon and others. If you’re not familiar with twelve step programs, the steps were originally created to “establish guidelines to overcome an addiction to

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald Allen. [“Commentary on Luke 13:1-9.”](#) *Working Preacher*. 24 March 2019.

alcohol.”<sup>5</sup> It has since grown to be widely used and often understood as a process that is intended to lead people into a spiritual and practical process of coming to know oneself better and to aid in healing relationships in one’s life. The first few steps are intended to remind us that there is a higher power other than ourselves. The next steps, four through nine, is a practice of what the Big Book describes as “clearing the wreckage from our past.” Steps eight and nine are the steps that are specifically focused on what we call as Christians, repentance and reconciliation, and what the program names as the process of making amends. While I won’t be able to do justice to the power of the steps, they read simply as:

“Step 8: [Make] a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: [Make] direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”<sup>6</sup>

The twelve step program intends to lead you towards the eleventh and twelfth steps of, “improving our conscious contact with God...praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out and to share this “spiritual awakening” with others.” While the program is not Christian specific, we can likely agree that it is seeking to live a life similar to the one that Jesus is calling us into. Many of us have found a deeper and more intimate relationship with God through the twelve step process. It is, in a way, a guidebook that helps us grow closer to God and one another.

As Lutherans, we have a long history and tradition of naming our wrongdoings and seeking to reconcile them with others, though admittedly we have not always been so great at it. I think we often get stuck, too overwhelmed by the injustices of the world to know where to begin. Yet in this parable, Jesus helps us to know where to start. He instructs us to begin with ourselves, to start in the communities that we are already a part of.

This instruction brought me back here, to Highlands. We are lucky enough to be reminded of the power of baptism this morning, we are reminded that we are called to care, love, and encourage one another in seeking a spiritual life with God. We are called to remind and be reminded that there is nothing we have to do to earn God’s love; it is freely given. Ultimately, we are reminded that God empowers and encourages us through the teachings of Jesus to engage in this difficult

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<sup>5</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book. 2002. 4th ed. New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

work of repentance, reconciliation, in hopes of experiencing a change in our lives, a metanoia, a spiritual transformation.

In our church calendar, as we move forward towards Easter, as we look towards Jerusalem, and as we enter into another metaphorical and very practical time of transition as a community, what questions does this text bring to the surface for you this morning? How is God speaking to us in our own contexts? How might we make use of these instructions from Jesus?

Rhetorical questions can be a bit hard and so I thought that we might practice this process together this morning through a small activity. With your bulletin, you likely received something like this, it looks like a little ornament, shaped like a fig. If you didn't let us know and we'll get one to you. And in a few moments, I will ask a couple of questions that I invite you to actually answer by writing those answers on your fig. During our next hymn, I'll invite you to hang those figs on this tree here, or to simply fold it and place it in your pocket if you want to keep those answers personal. (This is a ficus tree, which is in the same family as a fig tree that would produce fruit. It turns out it's difficult to find an actual fig tree in Colorado in March, so we did our best.)

My hope is that we can leave these responses here on the tree, that we will be able to read each others, and to ask ourselves and one another what we might do to tend to those hurts in the coming months. So, I'll read the questions slowly and you can answer as many or as little as you would like.

The Gospel message this morning brings me to ask that, first, and perhaps most importantly, where are we hurting? What hurts as a community? Where do we feel wounded or worn out? Where is our grief?

Perhaps our answers to these questions brings us to ask next: What needs tending to? What needs the attention of the gardener? Who can be the gardener? Who or what needs water, fertilizer, and a little extra attention?

I wonder, where is reconciliation needed? Where could we be better; as individuals, families, chosen or biological, and as a church community?

These are the questions that I am not only carrying into Lent, but also into our time of transition as a community.

There is a freedom, a grace, and a forgiveness granted to us by God that empowers us to ask and answer these questions. While they might feel like scary questions, we might not want to ask them for fear of stirring something up, or rocking the boat a bit, we can do so knowing that they are intended to bring us closer to God.

I invite you into a time of practice, a time of metanoia, whatever that might look like for you. Jesus invites us into this process this week because we can rest assured that we are empowered by God's grace to do this difficult work.

Please feel free during our hymn to bring your figs up at any time, or to do so when you come up for communion.

Amen.