

Sermon Lent 3
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. [Jesus] asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” 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. 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?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

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On Wednesday nights, a group of friends and strangers gather around in a circle to delve into a topic which we’ve begun to understand as a mix of both theological education and social justice. The topic is the Jewishness of Jesus. It’s our Lenten Book study on the book, “Jesus: 1st Century Rabbi.” To know Jesus - to dig deeper into his mission and his message - is to know him as Rabbi, because that’s what he was. He wasn’t an alien beamed down to earth; Jesus was a person, from a particular place, within a particular tradition, and when he taught, he did so within the framework of generations of Jewish Rabbis who came before.

We’re learning that understanding Jesus’ Jewish roots is also an act of justice because it’s empowering us as Christians to recognize and stand up against misunderstanding, mistreatment and persecution the Jewish people have suffered for centuries.

In reading the book, we’re being reintroduced to the Jewish faith and to the teaching methods and traditions Jewish rabbis and sages have employed from ancient times until today. If “Torah” is the word for the Jewish scriptures, the practice of scriptural interpretation used by Rabbis is known as “living torah.” Through rhetorical devices such as debate, storytelling and inquiry, Jewish Bible teachers invite participants to wrestle with Torah, to engage with the commandments, prophecies and stories making them come to life here and now.

Learning more about how the rabbis taught has been quite enlightening, especially when dealing with some of the more cryptic parables of Rabbi Yeshua (as Jesus would have been called in Hebrew) like we encounter in the Gospel of Luke today. The Lenten Book Study is really helping reveal the

intentional open-endedness of many of Jesus' teachings, that many were never meant to be boiled down to one single understanding, but instead have multiple layers of meaning. It's really revealing just how rigid our interpretations have tended to be throughout the years. Christians just don't know how to take a parable!

When we enter into the act of scriptural interpretation especially when dealing with parables of Jesus, we must remember two things: The first is there is not just one meaning. (Now that does not mean that it can mean just *anything*. We're still working within a framework and a context shaped by the rest of scripture and what we know of God.) And the second thing to remember - and this is the one Christians have struggled with the most - is that hyperbole, or metaphorical exaggeration, is a fundamental of the rabbinic teaching genre. The purpose is to challenge the hearer to make you think - sometimes to shock you out of complacency - to consider the direction your life is heading so you might repent, as we hear Jesus say today, turn around, return to the Lord you God.

Now that we have a little better understanding of the Jewish teaching style, Let's look at what Jesus has to say today. Let's start with the fig tree. We recognize that as a parable - first because Luke tells us it is - but also we recognize from experience that when Jesus uses these examples - a man, a gardener, a sower - he's not really talking about gardening, he's about to pose a theological question.

Jesus says a man comes to check on the fig tree planted in his vineyard, and for three years it hasn't borne fruit. But the gardener beseeches the owner to let him work it one more year. If it continues to be fruitless, then it can be cut down. Working within the framework we are already familiar with as believers and as Bible readers, let's consider some possibilities for what this parable could mean: The owner could represent God, the one who gives growth. The fig tree could be the person of faith, rooted and sprouting in the vineyard. And the gardener could represent someone more mature in faith who is working to tend and nourish the new believer to grow and become fruitful.

Or the fig tree could represent the body of Christ - the church - a new tree springing up in God's vineyard. The gardener could represent Jesus, who for three years poured his blood, sweat and tears into helping his followers sprout into a tree that would do more than take up space, but instead produce fruit for the kingdom. In this interpretation, the readers have the privilege of knowing, there is a surprise ending. And it's that the gardener loves the tree so much that in the end, he himself get cut down. He gives his own body and blood to become the nourishment that will give us life, make us grow and bear fruit in his name. I can guarantee though that as many different preachers are taking up this parable today there are as many different interpretations. And if we think in terms of rabbinical tutelage, that's OK!

So back to the first half of today's reading, when Jesus teaches on the Galileans who had been killed by Pilate, and the people who were crushed by the tower, he's teaching on literal events in the news, not metaphorical. Nonetheless we are reminded to continue to hear Jesus in his rabbinic milieu. Jesus makes such seemingly contradictory statements back to back, when he refutes the idea that the sins of these slain caused their death, and then turns around to say that his hearers would perish if they didn't repent. Rhetorical hyperbole at it's finest. Designed to make you think. Coupled with another favorite of the rabbis - Questions.

The people may not have actually been wondering whether the sins of these people caused their demise, But Jesus poses the question anyway. And he immediately answers his own question: No! Of course these people didn't die because they somehow deserved it But as any good teacher might, he sees this as a teaching moment, and seizes the opportunity to warn them against the spiritual dangers of fruitlessness, to provoke them to repentance, to return to the Lord their God, to consider the direction they're headed, to open their eyes to see that life is defined not simply by whether the flesh persists or perishes but by oneness with the Creator, by that vital connection with Christ the vine... so that while we still have our breath, we might bear fruit, we might truly live a life that brings glory to God.

It's the season of Lent, and as we've been hearing, the call of the prophet Joel is to "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." This Lent, let God draw you close through a renewed commitment to his Word. Whether that's through reading the Lenten Book Study book, or attending to your daily devotions, or just finding time to open the Scriptures, you're responding to the call of the prophet Joel. When you come across a difficult teaching, don't just walk away, but like Jacob did with the angel at Peniel, wrestle with it, and don't let up until you come away with a blessing. As we accept the invitation to what the rabbis call "Living Torah" letting the Word come to life through this active wrestling and engagement, Let's try to embrace a more Hebrew way of listening which is less rigid and more interactive.

Let's reconcile with the fact that the end goal may not be to ever "fully" comprehend the teachings of Jesus (After all, who can "comprehend" the divine?) but instead to foster a dynamic lifelong commitment to and relationship with them, as we return time and time again to the scriptures. The term for the collections of writings by the rabbis and sages throughout the years, we're learning in the Book Study, is "midrash." (You may have heard of midrash under the name the Talmud.)

The teachings and interpretations of the sages were often written in the margins of the pages, sometimes even spiraling around and around the biblical text printed on the page. I think that's a wonderful image for a fruitful relationship with God's word. That we come back to the scriptures around and around again, continuing through a lifetime of faith to circle back to the stories, prophecies and passages of scripture again and again over time, as the meaning of it grows and expands for us and our community. The interpretation may change for us as we travel through different seasons of life, but that doesn't make past interpretation wrong, we just build on it, moving toward a holistic relationship with the written Word.

Return to the Lord your God. Seize the opportunity to check where you're headed, and to repent - turn around - to align your path more closely with The Way of the Teacher. Because we learn along that way that life is not about whether your flesh persists or perishes It's about letting Christ live in you, letting the gardner tend and nourish you so that your existence does more than just take up space but instead bears fruit for the sake of the world. Because that's what fruit is for, right? Fruit doesn't benefit that tree. It feeds others. It nourishes others, who in turn spread the seeds producing more trees, which in turn bear more fruit.

Return to the Lord, your gardner and guide, your shelter and your nourishment. Let him feed you with his own body and blood. So that in him, through you, new life may rise up Life that glorifies God life that makes a difference for the sake of the kingdom.