

Parable of the Fig Tree

March 24, 2019

Our Savior's Way

Worshiping Sundays 8:00, 9:30, & 11:00 AM

Pastor Mann

How do you get your news these days? Newspaper? TV? Radio? Internet? Did you know—the engine driving most of the world’s news these days is Facebook? 1.5 billion people log in to Facebook at least once a month—that’s 1/5 of the world’s population. What is the news?—mostly it’s a lot of bad news! As if we didn’t have enough problems of our own, the worries of the world stream into our homes every day. And it’s not like these stories are fake news. They are all too real. 30,000 children die every day of hunger. Millions around the world don’t have access to safe drinking water. At the end of this week, a mission team is going to Haiti. Haiti—that’s where 70,000 people died in an earthquake back in 2010. That’s like the population of Frederick, Maryland.

We’d be crazy, in the face of such tragedies, if we didn’t ask the dreaded question, “Why?” It just doesn’t seem fair. Why does God let things like this happen? Why should anyone have to suffer like this? We have a lot of “why” questions, but they are nothing new. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus deals with the “why” question. First, the people ask Jesus about some pilgrims from Galilee who were killed--murdered by Pilate’s soldiers. Remember, Jesus was from Galilee himself, so these were hometown people asking Jesus about their own hometown folks. “Why did it happen? Why would people on a religious pilgrimage get slaughtered?”

The logic of the time said, “They must have done something really bad to deserve their fate.” But Jesus said, “No. Do you think these Galilean pilgrims were worse sinners than anybody else? No, I tell you.” Wow! That seems pretty clear. Then Jesus chooses another news story from the day. “Did you hear about the 18 people who died last month when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were worse sinners than anybody else? No, I tell you.” No, God does not throw suffering and tragedy at us to punish us when we are bad. God doesn’t play like that. But suddenly Jesus changes direction. It’s not about the “why” question anymore. It’s about an eternal reality. “Unless you repent,” Jesus says, “you will all perish as they did.”

I remember some years ago taking a walk with a friend up the trail at White Oak Canyon out near Sperryville, Va. It’s a beautiful trail that winds through the woods up to a series of waterfalls. Now, my friend (I’ll call him Scott) is deathly afraid of snakes and as we were walking along enjoying the scenery, I spotted up ahead, curled up on a rock in the middle of the trail, a huge copperhead snake. Luckily, the trail split apart at that point and as calmly as I could, without mentioning the snake, I suggested we take the other path. The turn worked. Scott never saw the snake and we were able to continue our hike. But, I don’t mind telling you, the rest of the hike was different for me. I spent my time scanning the trail for snakes. Our sudden turn made me look at the world with new eyes and with a sense of urgency.

Jesus wants us to look at the world with new eyes and a sense of urgency. We need to understand that there is a physical side to our humanity and there is a spiritual side to our humanity. If we suddenly lose our lives because of an earthquake or a tsunami or because a tower falls on us—that’s certainly tragic. But it’s nothing compared to the danger of losing our soul and spending an eternity separated from God. Jesus gives this warning, “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Then Jesus tells this story about a fig tree. A man had a fig tree in his garden. There was a problem. No figs!--the tree was just taking up space. So, the man called his landscaping company to chop it

down. But the owner of the landscaping company said, “Give it one more year. I’ll aerate the soil. I’ll dig some Miracle-Gro in around the fig tree—and we’ll see if you get any figs next year. If you do, fine. If you don’t, we will cut it down.”

“Repent or perish!” That’s what Jesus said, right? So, you could read this parable as a threat—times running out, so you’d better change, get on the right path, get right with God! Or you could read Jesus’ words as an invitation—let’s work the soil, and dig at our hearts, fertilize the spiritual side of who we are, and turn away from the things that get in the way of our relationship with God.

So there’s a threat in this story about a fig tree. There’s an invitation. And there’s also hope in this parable—give the tree one more year (there’s still time for us to change). Repentance means change—the tree needs to change in order to bear fruit. We need to change in order to bear fruit. We need to do more than take up space in God’s garden. And there’s a sense of urgency in this parable—you don’t have forever—time is limited—one more year—that’s it. After that, “Cut the useless thing down!” So, there is judgment in this parable too.

What does it mean to bear fruit? The Apostle Paul talks about this in Galatians 5.

It’s a beautiful thing to think that the fruit Jesus wants us to bear is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” But there’s something even more beautiful here. We’re not in this alone. The gardener is there to help. The gardener, Jesus, sends his Spirit to fill our hearts and lives. The gardener wants us to live. Let’s step back and look at the bigger picture—Because of our sinfulness and lack of good fruit, there is every reason for God to “cut us down.” But Jesus, the gardener, was cut down in our place. He gave his life for us. It’s amazing. The gardener died to save the fig tree. Jesus died so that we, the fig trees, could live and bear fruit. So, what are you waiting for? Make the changes you need to make in your life. Start bearing fruit. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.”

PRAAYER: Today, as we come to Holy Communion, it is good to know that this bread and wine is fertilizer for our soul—food for our journey. Jesus, You invite to Your table all who repent and want to change and all who put their faith in You. Forgiveness is offered here. The invitation is open to all: “Come, eat and drink, for the gardener expects his fruit.” AMEN.