

## Luke 13:1-9

At that time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? <sup>3</sup>I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse sinners than all the people living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”

<sup>6</sup>He told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, ‘Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?’ <sup>8</sup>But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. <sup>9</sup>If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.’”

## The Barren Fig Tree

### I.

Protesters hover just beyond the stage. Sharpies and cardboard are close at hand in sufficient quantities to take advantage of whatever situations present themselves. *Something* will surely present itself that allows the protesters to disrupt the ministry rally of the trendiest religious leader.

Cameraman just behind him, an intrepid reporter belligerently thrusts out a microphone to ask for a reaction to the latest news reports. *This* may be just what the protesters are looking for! The reporter has carefully chosen a story from the news to obtain maximum outrage velocity from his target. *Yesterday's* news really doesn't matter all that much to the reporter, after all. Unless he was the one who brought that tidbit, too, it isn't going to earn him any Pulitzer prizes. What happens with *today's* target and his reaction to yesterday's news could be a different story, however.

“Did you hear the news?” That phrase stirs up terror in nearly every public figure when being asked for a reaction. Be too condescending in your tone and *that* will lead the news. Too nonchalant will get you hammered by the pundits. A vitriolic rant against the government will present all kinds of opportunities to the reporters and the protesters alike. Answering seems like a no-win situation. On the other hand, *not* answering is fraught with danger, too. Refusing to answer leads to endless speculation by the reporters and the protesters about what your silence means. You can't win.

Perhaps you've heard the news lately. The New Zealand man who killed 50 Muslims gathered for worship in their mosque certainly sounds like a religious bigot. Perhaps the intrepid reporter wants to ask the Christian leader to give a reaction to such hatred.

More than likely you have *not* heard of the Christian genocide taking place in Nigeria. Muslims known as the Fulani jihadists have been systematically attacking Christians. 160 homes have been destroyed and 140 Christians have been killed in the last 5 weeks. Right now it doesn't seem to be politically correct for those same reporters to thrust microphones into the faces of Muslim leaders for a reaction to religious hatred.

Religious bigotry seems to be a timeless popular topic.

“At that time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1, EHV). News didn't travel with the speed of the Internet but there were protesters and reporters to confront the religious leader Jesus, none-the-less. They really didn't care *what* his reaction would be—silence, nonchalance, condescension, or a vitriolic rant. No matter which way Jesus responded, they figured they would have some outraged reaction suitable for them to attack later.

### II.

The news event the reporters chose was this: Some Galileans were gathered for worship at the temple. While they were making their sacrifices to the Lord, Pilate had them slaughtered, right there in the temple. The blood of the worshipers flowed right into the blood of the animals of sacrifice. It was a gory, gruesome, grizzly scene. What reaction do you suppose the reporters were hoping for from Jesus?

The violent, gory, gruesome, grizzly religious bigotry of today, perpetrated on Muslims and Christians alike, has a ring of similarity with the event presented to Jesus, doesn't it? Even if you aren't a religious leader or some other public figure who has a microphone shoved in your face, you undoubtedly have reactions to this kind of news.

What are *your* first thoughts? What thoughts follow after your first reaction?

Perhaps there is a sense of relief. "I'm glad this didn't affect me or those whom I love."

Maybe you ask yourself: "Why them and not me?" "Why does God let these kinds of things happen to some people and not others?"

Remember the friends of Job as they sat beside him in some strange, misguided attempt to console him? They wondered what Job had done to anger God. Job had lost all his property and his family in disaster after disaster; then he lost his health and seemed to be at the brink of death. Job's friends assumed there must have been some grievous sin he had committed for God to afflict him with so many and varied tragedies. As much as you try *not* to think that way, you can't help but wonder sometimes if those to whom bad things happen aren't being punished by God for some awful sin.

The reporters confronting Jesus with the news of the day knew how human beings react to this kind of news. This story was ripe for a cry of outrage in response. If they were lucky Jesus might take it still a step further—perhaps he would speak out against the atrocities of Roman rule that was abusing authority among the Jewish people.

Jesus knows about all the human reactions of outrage to such news stories. He didn't bite. Not even in the face of the cameraman and microphone. "He answered them, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? <sup>3</sup>I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too'" (Luke 13:2-3, EHV).

Why some and not others? Did the sins of some people come to the special attention of God and invoke an enraged reaction in the temple massacre?

"No!" Jesus emphatically answered.

Then he turned the attention of the reporters and the protesters and everyone listening back to themselves. "Unless *you* repent, you will all perish too." What did he mean?

"Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse sinners than all the people living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too" (Luke 13:4-5, EHV).

Why some and not others? Disasters happen. People get sick. Buildings fall. Earthquakes and tornadoes and floods and hurricanes strike in various places at various times. Jesus emphatically informs the media and those gathered to attend his rally that disaster strikes believer and unbeliever alike.

"Unless *you* repent, you will all perish too." What did he mean?

Jesus used the news of the day to force people to confront their own sin. *You* have angered God just as much by your sin and misdeeds as anyone you hear about in the news. Your actions have put you outside the family of God. Stop focusing on the news in a way that lets you pat yourself on the back for how righteous you are—how much better than others and how far above them are *your* actions and *your* attitudes. Look at yourself, rather than at others. How is *your* relationship with God?

A parable is in order to make you think about your relationship with God. A parable about a Barren Fig Tree.

"He told them this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, "Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?"'" (Luke 13:6-7, EHV).

There was a man who owned a vineyard. Raising grapes was the business. Still, not everything is about business. The man planted a fig tree, using some of the valuable resource of his land for a little something for himself, rather than for the business.

For three years in a row he had come at harvest time only to find nothing. No fruit—not even a few

small ones. This tree was just wasting valuable space.

God is the owner of the vineyard. Again the question comes up: How is *your* relationship with God? Is it a barren relationship—just a bunch of lifeless sticks on the trunk? Perhaps there are a bunch of leaves giving off the impression of health, but not one fruit—not even a bud. Perhaps God ought to get out his chainsaw and cut the tree right at ground level. Why should a fruitless tree use up precious space in his garden?

### III.

“But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. <sup>9</sup>If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down’” (Luke 13:8-9, EHV).

The gardener is Jesus.

Give this fruitless, non-repentant tree another chance. Give it more time. Give this poor tree—this poor soul—another lease on life.

But notice the most important thing of all. “Leave the tree alone this year also, until *I* dig around it and until *I* put fertilizer on it,” says Jesus.

Without Jesus God’s anger would consume every one of us. Really, the blood of the sacrifices the Galileans were making wasn’t sufficient, anyway. All our sacrifices, all our pious attempts to appease God, all our self-righteous attitudes are in vain.

On our own you and I would not qualify to be in the garden of God. It is the blood of Jesus—the ultimate sacrifice necessary for sin—that matters for our status before God. Jesus’ blood, poured out for our sins on the cross, has made us righteous and holy in God’s eyes.

It is the Jesus who gave us spiritual life in the first place who now pleads before the Heavenly Father for us—for more time for us. *He* will do the work. *He* will dig around us and fertilize us with his nourishing Word and life-giving Sacrament in hopes that we will produce fruit.

### IV.

God expects us to produce fruit for him. Paul wrote to the Galatians: “The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23, EHV).

Life is different because of what Jesus has done for you and me. Jesus died on the cross to make full payment for our sins. No longer are we fruitless trees in the garden, but eager and willing to produce fruits that show our gratitude for what Jesus has done for us.

Being a productive tree does not mean that you won’t die. The affects of sin in the world means that eventually physical death will come to us all. But your productivity as a tree in God’s garden comes from the power of the Holy Spirit working in you, who has given you the faith that gives you life. The new life you have received means that even though you will die physically, you will live forever with Jesus in the eternal garden.

In the meantime—until you reach heaven...how is the production of fruit on your tree? If you are unproductive, you are just taking up valuable space in the kingdom of God.

“But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it’” (Luke 13:5, EHV). Jesus asks—and receives from the Father—another chance to dig at the roots of your life so you may see the reason you were planted by God.

Jesus wants you to see the reason you were planted by God. He wants to give you the energy of the gospel. He wants you to see again that he gave *his* life so that you would have an eternal lease on life. He wants to call you *again* by his gospel so that you know you are saved. By his Spirit he wants to gather you with other Christians so you can benefit from their spiritual gifts—and so they can benefit from yours. He wants to renew and increase your faith so you can produce fruits in the kingdom of God.

Jesus always wants another chance to rejuvenate you. Use the daily news not to judge others, but to evaluate your own life. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus digs into your life and gives you spiritual energy. May he cause you to grow and bear abundant fruit. Amen.