

“The Gardener”
Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2010 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Cor. 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

The Gospel today offers two teachings on repentance. In one Jesus uses the headlines of the day as an illustration to motivate his listeners. In the other Jesus points to something in their path as an illustration to drive his point home, yet offer hope. Both offered significant teaching moments.

Two violent events had recently occurred, obviously shaking up the crowd. Some Galileans had been killed by Pilate. We have a sense that they were in the process of worshiping and sacrificing to God when they were murdered – their blood mingling with that of the sacrifice.

In another incident eighteen were killed when a tower fell on them. An unpredictable, random event. It reminds us of the incident in *“The Bridge at San Luis Rey.”* A bridge collapses and those on it, just happening to be on it at that exact moment, fall to their death.

A more contemporary example of such a tragedy involved passengers on specific planes on 9/11 and those inside the twin towers (or not) on that fateful day. The college student who just missed his plane that day, while others, on time to board, died. The man or woman who got held up in a line at the coffee shop and missed the train or subway they usually took to work, while others who just happened to be where they were supposed to be, on time, burned to death.

In Jesus’ day people held the view that victims of such calamities must have deserved it in some way. That suffering of any nature, even physical diseases, happened to those who were sinful. What happened was their fault and this was their punishment. What made the problem thorny was WHEN bad things happen to good people – or appeared to be the result of something totally random – like being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Were those Galileans worse sinners than all other Galileans? Were those killed in the rubble of the tower of Siloam worse offenders than others living in Jerusalem? Jesus poses the questions on the minds of those in the crowd. It is a teaching moment. “No,” Jesus says emphatically. Don’t we wish he had said more? To help the crowd around him and us today understand more clearly WHY bad things happen to everyday, mostly good, etc., etc. people just going about their daily routines. Jesus will work on this issue at other times in the Gospel, but not today. So we reluctantly put that issue on the shelf and turn to the one that Jesus turns to.

What’s on Jesus’ mind? What does he want to focus on with the news of the day? What he targets is the reality that someday for each of those folks (and also for us centuries later) there will come a knock on the door of our lives. And it may be unexpected. And it may be, in our mind and the minds of those who care about us, untimely.

That knock on the proverbial door. It signals a time of accounting. And it will put us face to face with the one who gave us life. On the other side of that knock we will be confronted

with troubling questions. We will be asked: “What have you done with it – the life I gave to you? What have you done with this one precious life? Name for me the fruits of this life I have given you! Tell me how they have nourished and given strength to those around you.”

And so Jesus confronts his first century crowds and those of us gathered here today. “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” (Those folks in the wrong place at the wrong time.) Jesus is not threatening us; simply presenting us with a possibility that could become a reality in our lives.

This Jesus we see today, is the “first and last chance” Jesus. There’s time, he is saying, but get with the program, right here, right now.

And then Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. My guess is there was one right there near the crowds. And it, too, offered a teachable moment. Imagine Jesus pointing to a pitiful, withering, almost lifeless little tree beside the road and offering a story in which each person in the crowd had the opportunity to identify (or not) with that little stick of a tree, fruitless yet again.

Who are the two characters who are critical in the life of that little tree? One, who finds no fruit on it, who orders, “Cut it down.” And he doesn’t mean, give it a good pruning. He means, kill it, take it up by its roots, throw it away. Its role in life is to bear fruit. It has not. It is worthless. Get rid of it now.

The other character? The gardener. Who gives the little tree another year – not to struggle on its own, but to be cared for, nurtured, hopefully, back to life. The gardener offers to dig around the base of the tree. Aerate the packed soil. Stir it up so that it can receive and be nurtured by the rains, its dry, withering roots moistened with life giving water. The gardener offers to put manure around it – adding nutrients to the soil in which it is rooted – nourishment that the roots can take in and send up into anemic branches. The stuff of life and fruitfulness – that’s what the gardener offers. Time to take in that which nurtures growth, newness, fruitfulness, renewal. Loving care and hope – that’s what the gardener offers. And his presence. This is what can stir, even that which is withered and dying, to turn its life around.

Repentance, that is what Jesus is teaching about – that turn-around moment that leads to healthy and fruitful life. And we see him as the gardener who will work with us to help us turn a withering life into one bearing fruit.

There is a fig tree on property down towards the end of Route 354 in a yard on the banks of the river. It stands, firmly rooted, near Helen and Lou Cobbs house. One day, by invitation, I went to pick figs. I stood in amazement before it. Probably fifteen to twenty feet tall. Quite possibly close to that in diameter. And hundreds of figs on it – it was in season. Broad branches had formed special spaces, sheltered, close to its center – special places, the Cobbs said, where children had played over the years.

Maybe you've seen that fig tree and can visualize it in your mind. Maybe you haven't seen it but can imagine what it looks like by this description. Then imagine a little stick of a fig tree, withered and dying. Which would you rather be?

The Cobbs fig tree is maybe much bigger than we could anticipate as a metaphor for our own lives. It's a Moses of a fig tree. Or a St. Paul of a fig tree. But it's not too hard to think of ourselves as a modestly sized and fruitful tree – much healthier than the one Jesus is pointing out to the crowd.

It seems like an easy choice, choosing to respond to the care of the gardener, but it isn't. Because if we want to become fruitful, it means we have to change. And it takes our cooperative work and intention. It takes opening up and putting ourselves in the hands of this Divine gardener and letting him work on us, around the very roots of our being.

It's Lent. It's spring. What better time to welcome the work of the Divine gardener in our lives!