

Isaiah 5:1-7

Luke 13:1-9

March 24, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

MORE THAN JUST TURN OR BURN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In June 1990, the Littleton Presbyterian Church in Littleton, NC suffered a great tragedy when one of the elders was murdered by her adult son, who then turned the gun on himself and committed suicide. The killings occurred in a bathroom at the UNC Medical School where Louise and Skip were for an appointment to talk about Louise donating her body to science. Because this happened in Chapel Hill, news crews from the Triangle area came to Littleton the day of the funeral. Nancy and I had to run some interference for the surviving family members, and ask the cameramen to give us a respectful distance. It was a very difficult time for everybody involved.

The shootings happened on a Friday and the funeral was held the next Wednesday. On that Sunday in between, I preached at the Littleton Church. A surviving son, who had grown up in Littleton but lived somewhere else, was in worship that day. After the service, he and I talked about the funeral. He told me he wanted me to preach a “hellfire and damnation” sermon (I’m not sure he used that exact phrase, but there’s no question that’s what he wanted). He wanted me and Nancy to lay out all of the sins and hypocrisies of the members of the congregation and to remind them that we never know when we’ll die. “Just look at my mother and brother,” he said. At the risk of putting words in his mouth twenty-nine years later, I think he wanted us to make sure everyone was right with God.

In the most pastoral way I could manage, I told him we wouldn’t preach that kind of funeral. After I laid out my reasons, biblical and theological and pastoral, he was quiet for a few moments, then said, “Well, you’re the pastor. And the Bible says to obey what the pastor says, so I’ll accept your decision.” To this day, I don’t know where in the Bible it says to obey what the pastor says, but I didn’t argue with him that day. After the funeral service, he spoke to me and Nancy and thanked us and said, “You were right. That was exactly the kind of service we needed.”

That personal, pastoral experience reminds me of a story that Dr. William Willimon of Duke Divinity School tells in his sermon called “The Writing on the Wall.” He says, “Early in my ministry, [my wife] Patsy and I went to the funeral of a relative of someone in my church. It was at a little country church, a denomination and style of worship not of my own. The funeral sermon consisted of the preacher whooping and shouting to the congregation about how, ‘It’s too late for old Joe. He’s dead! He might have wanted to give his life to God, to join the church. Can’t now. He’s dead!’ I thought to myself, What a comfort this must be to the grieving family. ‘Joe’s time is up. But your time, brothers and sisters, is not up. If you are going to give your life to God, do it today. If you are going to get your life right, do it now. There is still time!’ I was disgusted. On the way home I was telling Patsy how insensitive, manipulative, tacky

that funeral sermon was. She agreed. It was insensitive, inappropriate, manipulative. ‘And worst of all,’ she said, ‘it was true.’”¹

Here are some sayings you’ll never see posted on our church sign (taken from real church signs):

- Turn or Burn. Happy New Year!
- Choose the Bread of Life or You’re Toast!
- Try Jesus. If you don’t like him, the devil will take you back.
- Wake Up. It’s Time to Turn Before You Burn.
- You May Party in Hell, But You Will Be the BBQ!
- You Think It’s Hot Here?
- Get Right or Get Left

But isn’t that what Jesus is talking about in the story from Luke 13?

After all, Jesus says twice, “unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” But there’s more to what Jesus says than just “turn or burn.”

Six weeks after I began my work as pastor here at WPC, the Wallace-Rose Hill Baccalaureate service was held down the street at First Baptist Church. It was a Sunday night. Just before the seniors and the ministers processed into the sanctuary, the principal gathered all of the ministers in the Fellowship Hall and told us a member of the graduating class had died in an automobile accident on his way to the service. He was driving too fast and didn’t navigate a curve in the road correctly. When the service was over, all of us – graduating seniors and ministers – gathered again in the Fellowship Hall and the principal shared the terrible news.

The next morning I got a phone call from Joe and Bettiesue Tillman, asking about having the funeral service for Jason Robert Lanier, age 18, in our sanctuary. He wasn’t a member here, but had attended some youth group activities. Joe and Bettisue had contacted Rev. Charles Davenport, my predecessor, about coming back to Wallace to help with the service. I welcomed Charles’ participation since he knew Jason and I didn’t. Charles preached the sermon that day and used this text from Luke 13. At first I wondered why he had chosen this story, but his reason became clear very soon. The “elephant in the sanctuary” that day was “Why did this happen?” All these years later, I don’t remember exactly what Charles said, but I do remember how he used the stories of the Galileans being killed by Pilate and the Jerusalemites dying when the tower of Siloam fell on them to make the point that tragedies happen in life, for which we don’t always have explanations and answers. And yet, just the same, we want to know why. To a sanctuary full of grieving high school students and adults, Charles offered the good news of a merciful, loving, and patient God, even as he reminded everyone there how quickly life can change and how important it is to walk according to God’s ways.

We don’t know the particulars of the incidents reported in this gospel story, because we only learn about the Galileans and the Jerusalemites from this story. But they are universal stories, aren’t they? Turn on the TV, read the newspaper, log online any day of the week, any time of day, and you can read about similar events: worshipers gunned down in a mosque; people dying in tornadoes; homes and communities getting flooded out. Why do these things happen?

Jesus is very clear about two things in this encounter. First, he flatly denies that the reason the Galileans died at Pilate's hand and the Jerusalemites were crushed by the falling tower was because they were worse sinners than the other Galileans and Jerusalemites. Who knows what was the motivation of "some present who told him about the Galileans"? But their report to Jesus suggests a dangerous yet tempting way of thinking when bad things happen to other people – "They must have done something to deserve it."

And that thinking leads to the second thing Jesus is very clear about – the importance of repentance and living for God. According to Luke, just before Jesus had this conversation, he said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present times?" (Luke 12:54-56)

A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus teach in his Sermon on the Plain, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (Luke 6:41-42) Maybe it's not the same crowd listening to Jesus, but imagine Jesus thinking, "Don't you remember what I taught you about repentance and turning to God? Look after your own self before you worry about other people."

In her comments about *this* story about repentance, Dr. Angela Reed from Truett Seminary at Baylor University writes, "[Jesus] turns the tables on the conversation and warns that *they* are the ones who risk judgment if they do not choose to act promptly. They should worry less about the sins of others and more about their own need for confession. Unless they repent, they will all perish. Jesus' words continue to challenge us today to examine our own hearts with a sense of urgency. Are we so fixated upon judging the lives of people whose stories are told in the news or who live down the street from us that we avoid examining our own souls? Jesus was calling his listeners to earnest repentance, and he continues to call his people to humble themselves before God in genuine contrition."²

It's more than just "turn or burn" because repentance is not just about getting into heaven some day in the future. Repentance – turning toward God, getting a new perspective on life, going in a different direction – also makes a difference in our day-to-day life. The theological term for this is "sanctification." The apostle Paul describes it as "working out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12b-13)

That's probably why Jesus told the parable about the barren fig tree. The story expresses the urgency of Jesus' call to repentance ("Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?") **and** God's mercy and patience ("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.") (Luke 13:7-9)

This isn't the only place in the Bible where we hear about bearing fruit. Jesus told his disciples, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1-2, 5)

In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7), Jesus teaches, "You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit." (Matthew 7:16-17)

In the same way, the apostle Paul describes what the repentant life looks like in the here-and-now: "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another." (Galatians 5:22-26)

Do you remember when Professor Sam Adams from Union Presbyterian Seminary visited us and taught Sunday School? His mother, Rev. Joanna Adams, is retired now, but at one time she was the pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. In her sermon, "On Cutting the Fig Tree," she talks about the sense of urgency and the offer of grace in Jesus' parable. She says, "I want to challenge you with this thought this morning, that both the mercy of God and the impatience of God are a part of the grace of God. Jesus loved the covenant people, and because he loved them, he wanted them to wake up and realize that something was actually expected of them. To be sure, grace often comes in the form of forgiveness and reassurance, but at other times, grace comes as a radical call to bear fruit while there is still time.

"The good news of Jesus Christ is nothing less than the call to repentance and the offer of the forgiveness of sins. Here is the paradox: God is the judge of human behavior, yet God offers all a fresh start. And here is another paradox: the quality of our relationships with God and with one another are obviously of eternal importance, and yet God acts with patience so that good fruit might yet be borne. The temptation is always before us to mix judgment with grace, but as any theologian worth his or her salt knows, the result then is neither judgment nor grace, but a tepid, innocuous substance that can neither transform nor redeem."³

Lent is a time of reflection on our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, in light of his life, death, and resurrection, and in response to his call to be his disciples. That reflection involves repentance. Repentance is more than just saying, "I'm sorry, God," for a laundry list of behaviors and sins. Repentance means accepting the gift of God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ and living a life that bears much fruit for God.

It's true that we don't know when the wall might fall and crush us, and that's a good thing that we don't know. It might happen today. Then again, it might be years and years from now. In the meantime, Jesus calls us to repent, live for God, and bear good fruit.

Let us pray: Create in us a clean heart, O God, and put a right Spirit within us. Nurture the faint stirrings of new life where your spirit has taken root and begun to grow. We long for your healing light to transform us into the image of your Son, for you alone can bring new life and make us whole. In your mercy, shine upon us, O God, and make our path clear before us. Amen.

NOTES

¹William H. Willimon, "The Writing on the Wall," September 19, 1993 at www.preachingtoday.com.

²Dr. Angela Reed, "Luke 13:1-9," at www.baylor.edu.

³Joanna M. Adams, "On Cutting the Fig Tree," June 23, 2002, at www.fourthchurch.org.