

Time to Change ~Joseph Mitlyng

Dear Lord, thank you for bringing us together. Thank you for your message in the Gospel reading for today. It is as timely and relevant for our lives today, as it was 2,000 years ago. And now, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight. Amen.

So here we are, in mid-Lent, the season of repentance, the time to change. The scripture reading for today is Luke 13, verses 1-5 and 6-9. There is much packed into these few verses. As you are able, I encourage you to follow the scripture in the bulletin -- as I read it.

In the bulletin, the first paragraph is verses 1-5. These verses address the question: what does God do with our sin? When bad things happen to good people, is God responding to sin with some punishment? Jesus is talking with a group of people who are thinking that God, responds to sin, with punishment.

“At that very time, there were some present who told him about the Galileans -- whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He 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, about 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 perish just as they did.”

Before I go on, note that He said twice: “No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will perish just as they did.” In these first five verses, Jesus expands the conversation to consider a greater tragedy that could occur, unless things change. Jesus moves from the conversation, about the two tragedies, to talk of divine judgment.

Now, going on with the second paragraph, verses 6-9.

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit 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 have found none. Cut it down!’ The gardener 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.’”

The parable of the fig tree responds to the question: What does God do with our sin? The questioners presuppose a God who mainly punishes for sin. The parable speaks of a God with amazing patience whose nature is to give us time to repent of our sin.

It is significant that these comments about tragedy are followed by the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree: a parable of judgment that ends with a merciful word. A landowner and the hired caretaker discuss what to do with an unproductive fig tree. The owner decides that the fig tree is worthless. Fig trees bear fruit at least once a year, and more often in that part of the world. Three years, no figs, the tree is taking up space. Cut it down.

The caretaker pleads for patience. Give the seemingly worthless tree yet another year. To cultivate the tree, the caretaker says that he will loosen the soil around it and add

manure. If the dung doesn't do the trick and make a more productive tree, then cut it down. The unproductive tree is being given the gift of time, time to change, time to become more fruitful. There is judgment and accountability, but there is also, because God is merciful, the gift of time.

We're in the season of Lent, the season of confession and truth telling. And we may see different truths, but you may see in your own life, in the life of this congregation, we haven't been as fruitful as we could have been. And what does God do to us in our unfruitfulness? God gives us time. There is still time for us to be better disciples and a better, more faithful, more fruitful congregation.

Time for my truth telling. Before preparing this message, I had a simple idea about repentance. Each year I would pray: "Dear Lord, I am very sorry for my sins this past year, and I will try to do better. Amen" That was a start, but there is more to it. How will we be better disciples and a better, more faithful, more fruitful congregation?

Jesus commanded his followers, us, to go into all the world, teaching and baptizing all nations (Matthew 28), to be shining lights in the world, demonstrating to the world what God can do when ordinary people obey Him (Matthew 5), and showing everybody, everywhere, the truth about God (Acts 1:8). We've needed more than two thousand years to be obedient, and we are not there yet. Thanks be to God, there is still time.

Before I go on, I need to give credit where credit is due. In preparing this message, I benefited greatly from a publication called "Pulpit Resource" by Will Willimon. He is Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Duke University Divinity School. Pulpit Resource provides pastors and lay people with the meat of the sermon -- a big leg up on starting with a blank sheet of paper. As he says, "No sermon is a solo production." In so many words, he says "we all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before." Thank you, Will Willimon.

After Rev. John, Ladd, and I had agreed on Rev. John's leaving, we met to talk about next steps. I asked him what he had hoped to accomplish when he came. He said: "I hoped to lead the congregation to be disciples and not just a fellowship club."

Our covenant to be Open & Affirming is to be disciples -- disciples showing God's love for all. We have started on that path, but we all know we have a way to go. We show love for each other. My sense is that our shared love, and enjoyment in being together, is a large part of what brings us together each Sunday.

Are we showing love to others? We may have separations in our families or with people we used to consider friends. Family and friends are important. Our separations are, hopefully, not at the level of the Hatfields and McCoys -- they managed to keep a feud going for 28 years -- but still, the years are rolling by.

Growing the church today is seen by some as requiring a praise band and a charismatic preacher. That is not us, but the good news alternative is growing through relationships.

Loneliness is a major threat to the health and well-being of individuals. You may know someone who is living alone. People you know, including your children, may know of

others who are living alone. It might help to brainstorm ideas that will attract and engage people who are living alone.

It may take time, but you may find individuals who tell you: "Thank you for reaching out."

Lent is the season of repentance and the time to change. The good news!! There is time to change!!

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for this season of Lent -- the call to repent and change while there is still time. We know that in our own lives, in the life of this congregation, we haven't been as fruitful as we could have been. Thank you for the assurance there is still time for us to be better disciples and a better, more faithful, more fruitful congregation.

Help us stay focused on our mission of spreading Your word and love to all. Help us stay strong when we feel challenged with change. We ask that you hear our prayers for strength and understanding, and prayers for the people in our lives who are especially in need of your guidance, courage and healing.

Benediction.

As we go from this place, be assured that as we open ourselves to change, our roots will loosen. We will find ourselves doing things – being fruitful – in ways we never thought possible. There is good news! With God's mercy, there is time to change!

Joseph Mitlyng