Sermons from
Parma Greece United Church of Christ

TURN, TURN, TURN
The Third Sunday of Lent
March 24, 2019
Luke 13:1-9
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Repent or Perish
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 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 all perish just as they did.'

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree
Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it 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 find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '

Luke 13:1-9

I am going to begin with a story but want to say before
I begin: not sure if its true,
may not be politically correct,

and I am not the pastor.

There is a story of a young woman who talked to her pastor about her sin of pride.

She says, "Pastor, every Sunday I come to church and look around and think

to myself that I am the prettiest girl in the church. I try to stop but I just can't. Am I horribly sinful?" Pastor looked at her and said, "No dear not sinful; just horribly mistaken."

In today's Gospel lesson, some folks come to Jesus to talk not about their own sins, but the sins of others. And Jesus tells them that they, like the young woman, are horribly mistaken.

It's important to remember that Chapter 12 of Luke ends with several judgment stories in which Jesus warns his hearers to watch out for signs of the last days.

So, it is natural that they should wonder,

"Hey Jesus, did you hear about how Pilate marched into the Temple and killed those pilgrims from Galilee because he thought they were rioting?

Why did God let that happen?

Was it because those people were sinful and were being punished?"

We all understand this question. All pastors have gone to visit the hospital after someone has had a heart attack or a terrible auto accident or a diagnosis of cancer and the question comes, "What did I do to deserve this?"

Delmar Chilton, a Lutheran pastor likes to tell the story his son who told him over dinner one time that God was punishing him for going off his Lenten discipline.

He had given up fast food for Lent but had dinner in a Burger King on the way to a ball game and got food poisoning.

Chilton said, I really couldn't tell if he was kidding or not, but I told him his worst sin in this case was blaming God for fast food.

It seems that any time there is a natural disaster, some TV preachers decide they have to figure out what sins the people had committed that caused God to punish them.

And to all of this Jesus says, "You are horribly mistaken." Or as verses 3 and 5 put it, 'No, I tell you; but . . ."

Those "buts" are the most important words in this text. They signal a turn,

a turn away from worrying about the sins and fate of others;

a turn to thinking about our sins and our own fate in life.

"Unless you repent, you will all also perish!"

Jesus turned the crowd away from a discussion of other people's sins and turned it to a focus on their own need for change and repentance.

The theme of our text and the theme of Lent is "turning to and fro with God;

turning from fear – to faith,

turning from sin – to grace,

turning from the world – to God.

And focusing on the sin or saintliness of others distracts us from paying attention to our own journey with God.

In the early twentieth century, The Times of London, a newspaper read all over England, indeed even all over the world; invited famous writers to answer the question:

"What is wrong with the world?"

In response, they got many long essays spelling out both the problems and also, as a bonus, the writer's assessment as to who was to blame.

God, the Devil, the Church, the Communists,

the Fascists, White people, Black people, Asians, Hispanics, the Jews, the Germans, the Italians, the Chinese, the Moslems, and the Americans. It was women, men, the "Older Generation" and "These Young People Today."

GK Chesterton, who was a famous writer of the Father Brown mystery stories as well as books and articles on Christianity, wrote:

Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely, GK Chesterton.

Jesus call to us today is to turn from blaming God,

or the world,

or others,

for what's wrong with the world.

Christ invites us to turn to look at ourselves instead, and then to turn and look to God for help and salvation.

That is really what the word we translate into English as repent means; it means make a 180 turn,

> to turn from one way of thinking to another,
> to turn from going one direction in life to
> going in a new and different direction.

I think it was Luther who said that

> the life of the Christian is
> a life of daily repentance,
> a life of constant turning from the world
> to God and then turning back again from God
> to go into the world.

The result of this turning is the fruit we bear,

> the acts of love and kindness to others
>
> that our lives produce.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree reminds us that a life of turning to God and then back into the world will produce fruitful lives of generosity and love.

The reprieve given to the unfruitful tree reminds us that God is a God of grace and forbearance and steadfast love, a God of the second chance.

And we all sometimes need this reminder, because all of us are sometimes "horribly mistaken" about the sins of others and the sins of ourselves.

We have an unfortunate tendency to believe our sins are easily forgiven, but those of others, well, "…not so much."

In his series of novels about the small town of Harmony, Indiana, Phillip Gulley's Quaker pastor often reminds his parishioners that,

> "every saint has a past and
>
> every sinner has a future."

Yet, we often act as though our saintliness is better than that of others and our sinfulness is not as bad.

We act as though if it were only our sins that mattered, then Jesus would not have had to die on the cross;

just a good, stern talking to would have taken care of it.

It was the sins of others that caused Christ to die.

But we are “horribly mistaken.”

Jesus says to us, “No, I tell you”

Lent is a time to repent of our own sins, not the sins of others.

Lent is a time to plow up the ground, prepare the soil, heap fertilizer onto our souls;

seek the Lord’s will and way and trust in the Lord’s love and forgiveness,

of us and of others. Amen.