

“How Does Your Garden Grow”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, March 24, 2019

Luke 13 – Lent 3

Jesus has been talking to the disciples and to the crowd that has been growing around him. At the closing of Chapter 12, just before our reading today, Jesus says, “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.” (Luke 12:54-55)

I never second guess my husband Keith, a farmer all his life, when I tell him, after looking at the weather apps on my phone that the day will be bright and sunny, and he looks at me skeptically because to his eye, the skies tell him something different. He is always right.

Jesus knew his people well. And as they’re all nodding their heads in agreement to his observation about their weather prowess, he startles them by saying, ‘You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?’ (Luke 12:56b) As a commentator observed, “Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling? Not here. This time its loudly and pointedly!”¹

Our passage from Luke is about judgement and repentance. We hear two accounts of death – Roman troops have killed Galilean pilgrims as they worshipped in the temple during Passover. A tower falls during construction at the pool of Siloam, killing 18. And the culture in this early time would have decided that the people were killed because they deserved to be punished for falling into sin. A commentary notes, “That suffering is a punishment for sin is a biblical commonplace.

From Deuteronomy 28:15, “But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you ... then the curses are listed for the next 52 verses.

Think of the Book of Job. Job suffered horrible losses – his health, his property, his family. Most of the Book of Job is about Job arguing with his three friends who feel Job must have done something very wrong to deserve this terrible suffering. And yet, Job persists in his innocence.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus and the disciples encounter a blind man and they ask him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?’ (John 9:2), believing that sin caused the man’s blindness. Jesus will answer them that neither the man nor his parents had sinned so as to cause the blindness.

The Feasting on the Word commentary adds, ‘Deuteronomic theology, which had gained wide currency by Jesus’ day, asserted that obedience to the Torah brought blessings, but

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2789

disobedience brought a curse. Here Jesus clearly rejects that view. A person's righteousness or lack of it has nothing to do with any evil that may befall that person."²

And so, as the people talked about the Galileans who were killed, and the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, he asks, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" (Lk 13:2) "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?" (Luke 13:4) Jesus challenges the mindset of the culture which equated suffering with sin, punishment with sin, by adding these words, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." (Luke 13:5) Don't assume you're safer because you're righteous.

The parable of the fig tree that completes this text today echoes the words of John the Baptist, who said, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:9) The parable of the barren fig tree begins with a man coming to check on his fig tree in his vineyard and finding no fruit. He says 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?' The gardener asks him to leave it alone for one more year and he will dig around it and if it bears fruit next year, that's great, but if not, you can cut it down." Jesus is telling all who have ears to hear, 'just because you have not been cut down, do not presume that you are bearing fruit.'³

In her book, *Everyday Sacred*, Sue Bender writes about her experience of breaking a ceramic pot into pieces. Using an unglazed pot she'd made in the pottery class, Sue writes, "I was told to hold my bowl firmly in two hands and then bang the bowl on the floor. I held my breath. Though I acted "as if" my intention was to really crack the pot, I could feel my body constrict. I could feel myself holding back. 'You'll have to bang harder,' the instructor said. .. I tried a second time. Again, no success, 'You're hanging on so tenaciously,' my judging mind said, 'as if your life depended on keeping the bowl just the way it is. I say I want to change, and then, when I'm unexpectedly given the opportunity to try new behaviour, I hold on to an old, familiar way as if my life depended on it. ... On the fifth attempt the bowl cracked. The effect of the bowl cracking was visceral. I took a long deep breath, feeling great relief – a release. Release from what? I didn't know, but the expression 'fear cracked open' came to mind. Now I had two pieces. "Should I do more?" I asked. 'Yes'. There was no resistance the next time. A barrier had come down. With ease and just the right amount of force the next pieces broke easily. Nine pieces. I knew that was enough."⁴ It's hard to change our ways.

And here is Jesus asking why can't we interpret the present time? Maybe it's because we've never changed our viewpoint, never changed our outlook, never changed our perspective. The season of Lent is about repentance and this reading is smack in the middle of Lent asking us to look around, and ask ourselves what do we see? Do we know how to interpret the present time?

² Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2, Exegetical Perspective, p. 95.

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2789

⁴ Sue Bender, *Everyday Sacred: A Woman's Journey Home*, (New York: HarperOne, 1995), 153-154.

Repentance, or the Greek word *metanoia*, is called a turning around. But it is also expressed as a changed mind, a new way of seeing things, a new perspective of what's true. To bear fruit, we need to perceive the brokenness around us, and within us, in which we participate, in order to see what Jesus is coming to be victorious over.⁵

What *does* it mean to bear fruit? Is it a responsiveness within us to the brokenness in our present time – like the Good Samaritan? It's not enough to just observe but to enter into that space and look for ways you're helping the oppressed to be free. In response to last week's murders of 51 Muslims as they prayed in the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, there were many symbolic 'rings of peace' formed around GTA Mosques on Friday. A ring of peace is a literally a ring of people standing side by side around a mosque as the Muslim community gather within the four walls of their mosque to hold their weekly prayer. Different faiths and cultures were represented in the people who were part of the Ring – a gesture that will bear fruit. The Ring of Peace was a physical demonstration to express to the world that no one should be ever have to be afraid to be with their community to pray. It was a visible gesture of what we all know to be true – we are all in this together. 'Love for All. Hatred for None' was a banner at one Ring of Peace group in Mississauga.

Sue Bender looked at the nine large broken pieces of her bowl. The epoxy would hold the pieces together forever. "Holding together the first two pieces of what would become my new old pot was deeply, unexpectedly satisfying. Holding those two pieces, waiting for them to be joined, knowing there was nothing else I could be doing in those moments, I felt I was holding a baby in my arms – just holding, with such a quiet tenderness, doing a task and being still at the same time. "All of me" was present. ... That same calm engulfed me as each one of the pieces was joined to make the pot whole ... I looked at my bowl and saw it was beautiful ... When I put the pieces of my cracked pot together, I saw that *nothing* was missing. Nothing. I saw I was WHOLE.

So why tell this story of the cracked bowl? As Sue Bender writes, "We start out whole. Complete. Along the way, we may feel that something is wrong, or missing. We aren't the way we'd like to be or the way we think we should be. A crossroads, a new stage in life, a turning point, a crisis, when we feel we may crack, or we do crack, can be a difficult, frightening time. And sometimes we deliberately crack our own bowl."⁶

Jesus asks, "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

A changed mind, a new way of seeing things, a new perspective of what's true, all of these lead us to acknowledge the brokenness around us, and within us, in which we participate.

As we piece together the brokenness within and without, the work of repentance allows the barren fig tree to unfurl not only hopeful green leaves, but the promise of bearing fruit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1116 t

⁶*Everyday Sacred*, 156.