



Trinity UMC Iron Mountain March 20, 2022
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As we prepare to hear our Gospel reading, there are 2 things that might help you to hear the lessons and blessings of Jesus with fresh understanding.

1. Jesus was up to speed on current events and was very aware of how the people around him were thinking about and reacting to what was going on around them.
2. The prophet Isaiah 55: 9 and 10 tells us to remember these words from God:
For my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

With that in mind, let's hear what happened in Luke 13: 1 – 9.

Gospel Reading *Luke 13: 1-9*

At that very time there were some present with Jesus who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus 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 change your minds/repentⁱ, 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 change your minds/ repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then Jesus 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?'

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.'"

Pastor: A Word of God that is still speaking to us all.

People: Thanks be to God.

Thoughts about an Imperfect Life and Faith

“Lots of things can be medicine.”

Jesus, Heal our Thinking

Did you notice that twice Jesus asks: **Do you think**....Jesus knows that what we think affects how we feel, and how we pray and how we act. Let's not forget that Jesus came not just to heal the blind and the lame and the lepers. Jesus came also to heal our thoughts and our attitudes and our mistaken ideas about who God is and how God works in the world...This morning, let's see how that works in what we just read—keeping in mind that down through the ages, there have been lots and lots of Sermons preached on these verses.

In truth, our Gospel lesson has often been used to emphasize the need for repentance. Twice we hear...‘unless you change your mind and repent...you will perish.’ That has the sound of a threat, a warning, a lesson to be learned...or else. And, this being the season of Lent and all, repentance of our sins is an appropriate theme to consider.

But **what if Jesus wasn't thinking globally about ALL of our sins?** What if he wasn't saying—examine your whole life and admit to every little and big thing you've ever done wrong? What if Jesus was just talking about the situations at hand? What might that mean?

For example:

Scenario #1 Galilee. A group of people are talking to Jesus about Pilate, the Roman assigned prefect/governor of Jude. Pilate, who ordered the Galileans killed while they were in worship...mingling their blood with the sacrifices they came to offer. A horrendous, cruel act of governmental savagery.

Jesus listened to the people talk about this and Jesus knew the inner thoughts of those who spoke of such things. He knew they were thinking ‘Those Galileans, they must have done something really wrong for God to allow this to happen to them. Bad things happen to bad people. In some way or another, they deserved it, right Jesus?’

Jesus, most emphatically, said No...that is not right thinking. Those people were not worse sinners than all the other Galileans. And if you keep thinking like that...unless you change your mind and repent of that sort of thinking...you too will perish.

A modern day equivalent might be the way that some people in America think about the fact that black people in our country, are incarcerated, jails, prisons, at 5 times the rate of white people and are 3 times more likely to be killed by police than white people. You can argue the numbers and debate the statistics but how many of us think... They must have done something wrong to get into that situation. They must deserve it. They must be worse people than those of us who were born with NOT black skin.

If Jesus were here, can you imagine him saying...NO. That's wrong. And you need to change your thinking. Black people are not worse sinners than any of the rest of you. Yes, they may well have broken laws but not 5 times more than other groups of people. Yes, they may warrant some kind of civic punishment and consequences but not at the triple, quintupled rate of the dominant population. Change your thinking and see that They are victims of an unfair, harsh and unreasonable governmental/incarceral system. And be careful...because that same government could someday turn on you too...for its own reasons. Look at history...we could all be the victims of corrupt and cruel dictators if we happen to live in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or have the wrong color skin. Can you imagine Jesus saying: Change your thinking. Jesus says...there is more to this than meets the eye.

In the **second scenario**—the Tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 people. It was an accident, an act of God as the insurance companies would say. A natural disaster. Sure, the OSHA inspectors and zoning officers may have come in afterwards and identified shoddy workmanship, sleazy contractors, inadequate building materials, long term degradation of foundational supports. Like that Surfside Condo near Miami Fla back in June, 2021. 98 people died that day.ⁱⁱ Of course, I don't know that Jesus was talking about human incompetence so much as the fact that Disasters happen. For a variety of reasons or no reason at all.

And Jesus wanted to draw his listeners to pay attention to **how** they think about those disasters. **How** they explain the fact that some people fall victim to tragic accidents. He asks them: **Do you think** those people were worse offenders than all the other people in Jerusalem who were lucky enough to NOT be walking by at the moment? Is that what you think?

My sense is that now a days, we try real hard NOT to blame the victims of disasters. We really do want to have compassion. Perhaps a more contemporary way of looking at natural disasters might be along the lines of: Bad things happen to good people but God has a plan. It was **meant** to be. Maybe God needed more angels in heaven? Have you ever heard that one?

But let's think for a minute about COVID? If I may, on this 2 year anniversary. Isn't a pandemic a natural disaster? Sure, you might want to blame the Chinese or some government mismanagement but it's basically a virus, right? Viruses occur in nature all the time.

But how many times, when you heard about someone getting COVID...how many times did you ask—were they vaccinated? Were they boosted? Did they wear a mask? And how many of us patted ourselves on the back for 'doing all the right things' and then maybe still getting the virus anyway.

Can you imagine Jesus, in this pandemic era, saying? Change your thinking! Those who fall sick with COVID, regardless of what they did or did not do, are not worse offenders, worse sinners, than any of the rest of you. They are sick people, deserving of our prayers, our kindness, our chicken soup, our thoughtfulness. Change your thinking because you too can fall prey to an unexpected illness no matter how hard you try to keep yourself alive. No matter how many medicines there are in the world.

And so here, at this point, Jesus switches gears and tells a story. He knows and I do too, that it's hard for us to 'change our thinking' just based on current events and logic and lectures and instructions. Those may be useful to a point but a story sometimes works a whole lot better.

So once upon a time, Jesus more or less says, there was a fig tree, an owner and a gardener. The owner loved figs. Looked forward to figs. Trusted that the fruit of that fig tree would be his some day. And three years he waited. And three years in a row, he was disappointed. No figs.

The owner was a practical man. He knew that fig trees were supposed to bear fruit. He knew that everything has a purpose, a season, a function to fulfill. And he knew that not everything or everyone is able to succeed to his standards. That's just life...on life's terms as some of us say. So, the owner says...chop it down and let the good soil be used for good purposes. That is the productive and reasonable thing to do according to the measures of the world. It only makes sense, right?

But Jesus says...change your thinking. Consider the gardener.

Because, maybe the best medicine for our faulty thinking is this incredibly optimistic gardener who replies...Whoa, whoa, wait a minute. Don't be too hasty. Let's wait one more year. Give this little guy one more chance. The gardener says basically, I'll vouch for it. I'll do everything that can be done...more water, more nourishment, more attention and encouragement. One more year...no, not forever. But for now, for this moment. Don't give up on anyone too soon.

And why would we not be moved by this gardener, to change our thinking perhaps. How can we not remember that all of creation was formed in the beginning...in a garden. By the first Gardener of us all?

Why would we not change our thinking about those we call sinners, when we remember that the vision of heaven in the Bible is that of a garden, with a river running through it, and trees on both sides with 12 kinds of fruit and leaves for the healing of the nations.

And how can we continue to close our minds to Christ's healing of our own thinking when we remember Mary Magdalene, on that first Easter morning, in the Gospel of John. What was it she asked at the tomb of the crucified Jesus: 'Where have they taken away my Lord? I do not know where they have laid him?' (John 20: 13) Remember how she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, resurrected, alive, but she did not know him, supposing that he was the Gardener who said her name and she knew him to be Jesus.

We can trust the Gardener. We can give people one more chance, just as the Gardener gives the fig tree one more year. Just as we are being given one more chance to change our thinking, which will change our attitudes and changed attitudes will change our way of being in this world. We don't always have to try harder and do more in order to become the people God intends for us to be. Sometimes we just have to pause for a moment and consider the Gardener and make an effort to try and imagine what God may be thinking—then try thinking that way as best we can.

The Gardener opens the story toward the present and the future. Not offering cheap grace or forgiveness with no reckoning...but he does advocate that every chance—even extra attention—be given before a final decision is made. *The Gardener insists that there can be a Time of reprieve and then, yes, eventually of reckoning...but first a chance for us to overcome our reluctance to recognize God's project or to bear the fruit of that promised harvest.* ⁱⁱⁱ

There are indeed many kinds of medicines for what ails us. But the best medicine of all is to give ourselves, our thinking, our hopes and fears to the One who wants the best for us...to the One who is eternally reaching out to hold us and to heal us. So that we might not die as those who have no hope but have the eternal life and love and mercy and grace—here and now that we know can be ours in heaven. And... to share ALL of that with those we know and love and yes, even those we fear and call enemies. That's what the Gardener did. May we go and do likewise...on earth as it is in heaven. Let us pray:

Holy and Original Creator...there is so much of unhappiness and injustice in the world. And it all comes at us so fast and continuous as to be over-whelming. We try to cope by over-simplifying with stereotypes and one-dimensional thinking. Even though we know that You have the heart and the love to encompass all and to shelter each who seeks refuge in you. Widen our thinking Lord. Open our minds to new thoughts, creative ideas, and attitudes that do justice to the great and beautiful design of your world and all of your creation...

^{i i} Swanson, Richard 1, *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2006, pp. 302 translation of Gospel.

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surfside_condominium_collapse read on March 19 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Ringe, Sharon H., *Luke*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1995, pp. 183 – 185.