

SERMON – “The Mystery of Repentance” – Third Sunday of Lent  
Text: Luke 13:1-9

On September 11, 2001 we as a nation witnessed the effect of evil when thousands of innocent people died. We can testify to the grief, anger, and the immense pain felt of the senseless tragedy. And when thousands of people died in the earthquakes in Haiti and Chili, we again feel helplessness in preventing such horrific human suffering. After such events when innocent people die, the natural question is why? God why did you let these people die? Did they do something so awful that you would not help them? Why didn't you intercede and protect them? Yes, questions of faith pop up in times of disaster, whether it be through political terrorism or natural disasters.

So we find in Luke's text the same ancient faith question. Why did these people have to die? There are reported two events where innocent people died. The first was the terror brought on by Pilate. An incident where Pilate slaughtered a group of Galileans resulting in their blood mingling with their temple sacrifices. No other ancient source reports an event that can be identified with this incident, but Josephus' accounts of Pilate's confrontations with the Jews, confirms that bloodshed was not uncommon. The other event was due to structure defect or earthquake when the “tower of Siloam” fell on a crowd killing eighteen people, who simply were at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jesus uses these questions as a teachable moment about judgment. To their question, “Do you think they were worse sinners than we”, and that is why they suffered and died. Jesus gives this response “No, I tell you; but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did. This may sound harsh to us, but in

ancient thought Jesus is saying something truly radical. Sin is not the cause of calamity. Their thinking, and I have to confess, some people of faith thinking today, is that if God is responsible for everything that happens. God is a just God, then calamities must be the result of human sinfulness. The New Interpreters Bible Commentary states beautifully the fallacy of this belief. "The fallacy of such logic is the notion that God is the immediate cause of all events, which leaves no room for human freedom or freedom in the created order, and therefore for events that God does not control." In his answer Jesus states that the people were no more sinful than those who live to ask Jesus the question, why. What Jesus is saying here is that life is uncertain. Death is fickle. There is no rhyme or reason why people die and others live. For all who die, judgment before God is inevitable.

As we remember peoples' reaction to 911 in our own country it was people flocking to churches. They felt vulnerable, they felt that it didn't matter how one lived, a bomb would kill you if you were in its path. It was a time in our eternal youthful thinking country that we had to face our mortality. It was a time when many people evaluated their lives and for a moment turned toward God. But what they missed was repentance. They turned to God with questions but they didn't turn their lives over to God. This is what Jesus is telling people. Your life is a gift from God, stop wasting your time turning away from God. Turn toward God and be transformed, be changed, and bear fruit with your lives.

Many think of repentance as a form of beating ourselves up. I contend that repentance is the honest way to look at ourselves. And as we face our sin,

our separateness from God and from each other, we realize not punishment and death that we , but experience and receive the great gift of God's mercy toward us in Christ, Jesus. When we face our wrongdoings, the ways we have hurt each other and the ways we have walked away from God's way, we know we deserve punishment. However, God chooses, through Jesus Christ, to forgive us and give us life! Because Jesus Christ took our punishment for us on the cross, we have new changed lives, not death. The mystery in repentance is that we receive not death, but life! But for us to choose life and not death through repentance we have to understand what repentance involves.

There are four steps involved in repentance. The first step is the recognition of the sin that has occurred. We need to stop the excuses and the blaming that does not allow us to face our sin. We have an example of this in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:17) "he comes to himself, comes to his sense and realizes that he has done wrong in the "far country" that he has a Father, that he can return home to.

But honest recognition is only the first step. If we do not proceed to the next step we will not experience new life. In believing that we are forgiven then we want to do something. We want to respond. We want to show our grief to our sin. In ancient times people wore torn sack cloths to show their grief over their sin, some put ashes on themselves to also show their grief. Again what ever is shown is not done to get forgiveness, it is done in response to the gift of forgiveness that we don't deserve. It shows our true grief over what we have

done. Sometimes our tears are our ashes and or deep contrition of heart. They express our yearning to be near to God.

This leads to the next step, in joyfully receiving what God through Christ has given us. In realizing we are lost, we realize that we are distracted and are walking away from God we, in this realization, this big aha, we want to turn to, we want to return to God, once again to be in a right relationship. In Luke 19:8, Zacchaeus responds to the mercy and grace of Jesus coming to his house when he did not deserve such an honor. He says “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” This is a visible sign that change, turning around, has occurred and grace has been joyfully received.

The final step in repentance is changed living. Repentance is considerably more than feeling sorry. It bears fruit that fits the repentance. In Acts 26:20 Paul praises those whose changed lives prove their repentance “by their deeds”. True repentance is seen in how we live a changed life.

But let us remember that repentance usually is a process of changing. It is not a one-time turn around. It is a life style in living faithfully with God. This comes out loud and clear in the parable of the fig tree that we have in verses 6-9. Tender care is given to a fig tree not for one season but for ample time of care, three years. And for not the tree remains fruitless. The farmer, orders the gardener to cut it down, to not waste any more resources on this fruitless tree. But the gardener says, give me one more year to dig around it, and use good manure. If it still does not produce then it can be cut down.

Fruit of repentance takes time, and God will give ample time of grace for this to happen. However, it does not erase the urgency of this repentance. For life does not last forever. You see we are all terminal. We all are going to die, we just don't know when. We do not know if and when we will lose our earthly life due to cancer, heart attack, a car accident, a fire, or earthquake. For all we know today could be our last day on earth. But we do know that when we do die we will face our maker, God, and there will be judgment. So my friends the time we have today, is like the extra year that God gives to us to turn and return again and again as a faithful life style, so that we may have life. What are we doing with this precious time?

Let us not waste our precious time on this earth by ignoring God, by turning away and doing what we want, by not letting go of what we want and reaching for what God through Christ wants for our lives. Let us not waste our time by holding on to grudges or anger when it prevents us from having life in forgiveness. Let us turn away from unhealthy ways of living in telling lies, or blaming others for our situations, instead of being empowered to live truthful lives and responsible lives that gives us life. Let us turn away from greed and hoarding that drains the life out of us and others; and return to God in giving of our lives and things to those in need. Let us turn from depending on our power and will to change our ways or the churches ways and return to God depending totally on God for life.

Let us use the time before communion as a time to truly turn toward God being honest about who we are and what we have done or not done. Then in Christ's grace, let us partake of the bread and cup given to us not because we deserve it, but because it is a gift we need. What are we waiting for? Time is a wasting. Let us repent today, now, before the ax is laid at our feet and we are cut down.