

Sandra Stogsdill Brown
Where's the Fruit?
Luke 13:1-9
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When I was in college, I spent my summers doing clerical work in various departments at a mortgage bank in Kansas City, MO. It was a great job, because there was air conditioning, regular hours, and it paid more than minimum wage, and it was boring enough that I was highly motivated to finish college, so I could do something different for a living. And I learned a lot about people, because the mortgage industry can get pretty intense in the summer, with all the people wanting to buy homes that time of year, and all the pressure to get a loan approved and processed and closed by a certain date. Yet overall, most of the people I worked with were pretty nice, including the accounting supervisor I worked with when I was helping out with auditing.

Now, this was 30 years ago, when people could still smoke at their desks, and women still wore pantyhose. One day the topic of AIDS came up. I don't recall how, but it came up. And the accounting guy commented, in a tone of total disgust, "Talk about God's punishment on a group of people," which for him at that time clearly meant gay men. And that comment has stayed with me for 30 years.

We've all heard comments like this at one point or another. People have speculated that the events of September 11 were God's punishment on America for abortion, or that God punishes the nation of Haiti through natural disasters for practicing witchcraft and voodoo. We think, oh, that's ridiculous—how could anybody think that? And yet it's human nature to look for explanations when terrible things happen. When someone gets cancer, we want to know—did they smoke? When someone dies in a car accident, we want to know—were they drinking? Were they wearing a seat belt? Were they speeding? We want the answer to be, "YES."

Because if they WERE doing any of those things, then maybe if we're careful and do all the right things, we can make sure it doesn't happen to us. We looked at this last June in the sermon series, "Yes and No," when we talked about that phrase so many of us love so much, "Everything Happens for a Reason." Is it true? Well, yes and no.

In today's story, Pilate has done something unspeakable to some people from Galilee. Jesus hears about it and he knows what his listeners are wondering: why did this happen to these people? Surely they must have done SOMETHING. Please let them have done something to deserve this, something we can point to and blame. Then maybe we can make sure it won't happen to us. Tell us, Jesus, what did they do?

Jesus says: no, no, NO. The question isn't, "What did THEY do?" The question is, "What are YOU going to do?" Given that disaster can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime, given that you are alive today, right now—what will YOU do?

You know, of all the stories we have about Jesus, there's not one story I can think of where Jesus is rushing, or in a hurry. He's generally pretty calm. This is man who can sleep in a boat on a lake during a storm. But he also knows how short and unpredictable life can be, and he drives this point home again and again in his teachings. The parable of the rich fool. The parable of the watchful slaves. And now, a parable about a barren fig tree. The point being, we are created to bear fruit, and we have a limited amount of time to be fruitful.

Twice Jesus says: "Unless you repent, you will perish just as they did"—"they," meaning, the people that Pilate killed, and the people who were killed by a falling tower. To perish as they did means to die unprepared. Caught off guard. Maybe before we've had a chance to bear fruit. But today, we're here. We're alive! It's not too late. What do we do?

REPENT, Jesus says.

Repent is an interesting word. The definition of this word is “to feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one’s wrongdoing.” But the Greek word Luke uses is “metanoia,” which actually means “a transformative change of heart,” or “a change in one’s way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion.” That’s the kind of repentance Jesus is talking about, not wallowing in remorse.

How do we do that?

Looking all the way back at the third chapter of Luke’s Gospel, our buddy John the Baptist offers one possibility. People are coming out to the wilderness to be baptized by John, and he says to them, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance . . . 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.” The people ask, “What then should we do?” He tells them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To the tax collectors, John says, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you,” and to the soldiers who want to know what they should do, he says, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

According to the Gospel, repentance is an action. It is an action that ultimately involves our material resources. Repentance isn’t repentance if it doesn’t bear fruit, and what is the fruit of the Spirit? “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, GENEROSITY, faith, gentleness, and self-control,” according to the book of Galatians. In the Gospel of John, Jesus will say to his disciples, “I have appointed you to go and produce fruit that will last,” and my goodness, doesn’t the world need us to bear some good fruit right now?

You've heard the term "food desert" before. It's a term for an urban area where it's hard to find affordable, good quality fresh fruits and vegetables. In a food desert, it's a struggle to get the nourishment you need in order to be healthy.

Too many people today find themselves in FRUIT deserts, where the fruit of the Spirit is in short supply. When we think about our mission statement, "Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose," a compelling purpose for any church, and for any believer, is to become a "fruit oasis," where people can come and find branch after branch of ripe patience, succulent generosity, juicy gentleness, and sweet self-control. REPENTANCE is God's tool for digging around us and fertilizing us, so we can grow and produce that good fruit.

There's no time like the season of Lent to reflect on repentance, to take an inventory of our own fruitfulness, and to consider any of our attitudes and actions we might need to repent. Repentance will look different for each one of us. But here's a question to get us started:

How many coats do you have?

I went and looked in my closet, and counted five. One for skiing, several for cold winter days, and one really ancient one for bitterly cold winter days. I realized, I need to repent; I need to share. Now, this is the first Sunday of spring, so it's not really coat drive season anymore, but I invite you to check your own home, and count your coats. If you have an extra one, I invite you to bring it to worship next Sunday, and place it on the communion table as a sign of repentance, and we will make sure it gets either to the Rescue Mission, which can store it for next winter, or the Salvation Army, for next fall's Share the Warmth Coat Drive.

If you don't have an extra winter coat, maybe you have an extra fleece or hoodie. If you don't, don't worry, and don't go buy a new one to give away. But if you do, you're invited to

participate in this simple, concrete act of repentance. We'll focus on coats because we already collect food for the Blessing Box and Doorstep.

There's a prayer in The Book of Common Worship that we often pray at the beginning of a memorial service, and there's a line in it that goes like this: "Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are ended, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in Jesus Christ our risen Lord." Living as those prepared to die means living a life that is fruitful, with nothing left to repent because we've been repenting every day. Or as a Presbyterian might say . . . Reformed and always being reformed. Amen, amen and amen!