

SIN IS SIN  
Luke 13:1-9

I have never been much of a gardener. In fact, you might say I have the proverbial black thumb. My first experience with a garden was as a child when my older brother George planted a vegetable garden. George, already the consummate businessman, had managed to convince his younger siblings that gardening is fun!! He prepared the garden bed, planted the seeds and watered them. He then proceeded to organize the rest of us to do the weeding and all of the harvest. To this day, I do not know where he went, but when it came time to harvest the garden, George was nowhere to be found!! Georgie's garden was quite prolific, and I thought we would never get all the green beans picked!! Many years later, when I married Vern, I decided to plant tulip bulbs in front of the porch stoop. Spring really is my favorite time of year especially when the forsythia, daffodils, tulips and lilac bloom in succession. The endless shades of green from the early lacy leafing out of the trees, the lawns greening up and the winter rye in the farmers' fields all make for the perfect background for the bright yellows, reds, purple and white of spring flowers.

So, with great anticipation, I planted a whole bunch of tulip bulbs in October picturing how pretty they would be after our long winter snows. In Vermont there are 5 seasons – Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall AND Mud season where it is possible for small cars to disappear out of sight as the earth thaws. During Mud season, I began to look for green shoots where I had planted the bulbs. I looked and looked, waited and waited...and waited. By this time, it was almost June...still no tulips! Vern decided I must have planted them upside down and my tulips were blooming somewhere in China!! Finally, some little green shoots appeared, and eventually the whole bulb. I think that may have been my last effort at planting a garden of any kind! I decided to leave that to the true farmer and stick to planting seeds of faith.

Jesus uses many agrarian scenes when he is teaching the crowds who follow him. He does this because this is something familiar – part of their daily living. In our text this morning, Jesus has been teaching the crowds when someone brings the news of Pilate murdering some Galileans while they were worshipping in the temple offering sacrifices, their blood mingling with the blood of their sacrifice defiling the very offering they were making. These people are not simply bringing Jesus information; they are looking to see how Jesus will react to such news. They may want to know if Jesus plans to continue with his journey to Jerusalem knowing a similar fate may await him there. They also want to know if this event is significant – a precursor of what is to come between the Jews and Rome.

Jesus knows what they want, but instead of satisfying them he turns tables on them by saying, “...I tell you unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.” N.T. Wright says that many have looked at this passage as a warning about perishing in hell after death, but in looking closer, Jesus is making it clear those who refuse his summons to change direction, to abandon the crazy fight of national rebellion against Rome will suffer the same consequences. (Luke for Everyone, page 162) If they continue to ignore God's kingdom call to repent, to turn from their present agendas, then they can expect the very walls collapsing on top of them as the enemy closes in.

Then, Jesus shifts gears and is suddenly talking about a fig plant that is not producing and the conversation between the owner and the gardener. How are we to understand this whole exchange? Jesus is in the middle of a riff on repentance, in particular the importance of Israel, God's people, recognizing their need for a savior lest they experience the judgment of God. In doing so he relays a parable about an unfruitful fig tree, a tree that in the estimation of its owner has been given more than enough time. But rather than cut it down, Jesus tells us of a gracious vinedresser who intercedes for the tree saying, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it". (Luke 13:8) (Homiletics, 2013)

It may seem insignificant but this one sentence from Jesus is an essential reminder to how God does his most important, yet often painfully slow, work of changing lives. When examining these words, most people immediately jump to the verbs, to the action. The vinedresser (Jesus) wants to dig and fertilize. In relational terms we could think of this as the essential components of truth and love. To bring about change, God tills the soil of our hearts and minds with his truth – ripping out the weeds of lies and the old roots of sin and making way for good things to be planted. He then adds in the fertilizer, or in real terms love, the truth of the gospel and the promise of his unrelenting compassion in Christ, which serves to enrich our soil, begins to take root and spurs on new growth. Life change takes truth and love.

Well then, what is repentance? I can give you the catechism definition, but repentance is literally a turning away from certain behaviors and turning toward God.

Better yet, a minister was once speaking to a group of children. In opening his talk, he asked the question, "What is meant by the word repentance?" A little boy raised his hand. "Well," the minister said, "what is it, my lad?" "Being sorry for your sins," was the answer. A little girl on the back seat raised her hand. "Well, my little girl, what do you think?" "I think," said the child, "it's being sorry enough to quit." Isn't that great? Repentance is being sorry enough to quit sinning!!

The call to repentance didn't end with John the Baptist, or with Peter. It continues to this day. Just this week I read about a strange friendship between the former head of the NAACP and the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. They met debating each other, many years ago. The Klansman taunted the black man and called him names. The black man responded that nothing the Klansman could do would make him hate him. He responded instead with love. Over a period of many years, the Klansman would call the black man and say, "Hello, nigger." But in 1991, he called and said, "Hello, brother." He went on to tell his friend that he had left the Klan, had accepted Christ, and was called to preach the gospel, and that his conversion was due to the example of the black man returning hatred with love. Today, they share a pulpit and together preach God's love. That's repentance.

Well then, what is sin? Sin is Sin. God does not score sin on a sliding scale; for God, the 'little white lie,' is just as grave a sin as murder. Both take us far away from the people God created us to be.

One of the best definitions of sin I ever heard was, "sin is missing the mark. Sin is falling short of what God expects from us. Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor further makes a distinction between "sin" and "sins" which I find quite interesting. "Sin" is the human condition into which we are all born because of the first sin in the Garden of Eden. "Sins" are the willful human choices that maintain that distance. That struck a chord with me. Sin is the human condition into which you and I

were born because of Adam and Eve disobeying God in the garden, while our sins are the choices you and I make that maintains this distance.

Where is the Good News of Jesus Christ in all this talk of sin and repentance? Both of these words are dependent on human action. Scripture tells us in Romans 3:23 that ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.’ And Romans 6:23 tells us that the ‘wages of sin is death,’ but, BUT the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is the good news – God always forgives when we earnestly repent and seek to become the person God always intended us to become. Whether we repent of what we said 5 minutes ago, or 25 years ago...there is forgiveness.

A little more than 25 years ago, a youth walking by the old log Muskego Chapel on the Luther Seminary campus in St. Paul, Minnesota, peeped in its window and noticed a beautiful chalice sitting on the altar. He broke into the chapel and stole it. Naturally, the young boy didn’t know that this chalice had been a gift to Luther Seminary in 1936 from Norway’s King Olaf. In October 2006, Pastor Glenn Berg-Moberg from St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church, a neighbor of the seminary, called Luther President Rick Bliese, asking for a meeting to discuss “an interesting matter.” The boy who had stolen the chalice, now a grown man, had visited his congregation. He was dying of cancer and had one request: He wanted to return the stolen chalice to the seminary. He had kept the pewter chalice in perfect condition. It had sat on his mantel for 25 years. Finally, its presence had become a source of discomfort and disease. Before the man died, he wanted it returned to its rightful owner and place, Luther Seminary and Old Muskego Chapel. President Bliese received the gift of “the prodigal chalice” with surprise and delight. Letters were written to this dying man expressing appreciation, as well as forgiveness for his deed. The man received the letters with gratitude and died soon afterward.

Now this chalice has become doubly special because it was returned after serving the purpose for which it was really intended: calling sinners to repentance and forgiveness. It has become a powerful sign of Luther Seminary’s mission.

Pretty somber words for this somber season of Lent. Too often, though, the church has forgotten the importance of repenting and asking for forgiveness. In a few moments I will invite you to join me in a prayer of confession. Before we do so, one final story to help us not to be discouraged when it feels like we are taking one step forward and 3 backward as we continue to seek to become the persons God wants us to be.

The following prayer is attributed to Archbishop Oscar A. Romero of El Salvador who was martyred by assassins while celebrating mass in 1980:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Please join me in a prayer for confession:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the way of peace.

Come into the brokenness of our lives and our land  
with your healing love.

Help us to be willing to bow before you in true repentance,  
and to bow to one another in real forgiveness.

By the fire of your Holy Spirit, melt our hard hearts  
and consume the pride and prejudice which separate us.

Fill us, O Lord, with your perfect love, which casts out our fear,  
and bind us together in that unity

which you share with the Father and Holy Spirit. Amen.