

IS IT TOO LATE?

Luke 13.1-9

March 24, 2019, Lent III

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How many of you have been sitting in a classroom, and the class has been going on for a while – perhaps you are really immersed in the subject or you are really bored - and the teacher, all of a sudden, looks up and asks: “How much time do we have?”

Maybe you weren’t thinking about that question until just now and now you have this uncontrollable urge to check your watch. How much time *do* we have?

For some good but mostly bad, that question – how much time do we have - has haunted the biblical tradition for almost its entire history.

You have seen it: The robe-wearing, wild-haired guy carrying a sign that says “Repent! The end is near.”

And, of course, the implication is that the end is coming and *you* all should repent. I’m just fine, thank you.

It is that kind of image and those kinds of questions that lead us to the story about Jesus in Luke 13.1-9.

Immediately preceding this, Jesus says: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does: You do have ways to figure out what time it is. So, don’t take too much time to do what you already know you should do.” And one of those things, he says, is to be reconciled with your sister or brother *now* before it’s too late to work things out.

And so the story goes on from there:

Lesson: Luke 13.1-9 (*Inclusive Bible*)

On the same occasion, there were people present who told Jesus about some Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their own sacrifices. Jesus replied, “Do you think these Galileans were the greatest sinners in Galilee just because they suffered this? Not at all! I tell you, you’ll all come to the same end unless you [repent] change your ways. Or take those eighteen who were killed by a falling tower in Siloam. Do you think they were more guilty than anyone else who has lived in Jerusalem? Certainly not! I tell you, you’ll all come to the same end unless you [repent] change your ways.”

Jesus told this parable: “There was a fig tree growing in a vineyard. The owner came out looking for fruit but didn’t find any. The owner said to the vine dresser, ‘Look here! For three years now I’ve come out in search of fruit on this fig tree and have found none. Cut it down. Why should it clutter up the ground?’ “In reply, the vine dresser said, ‘Please leave it one more year while I hoe around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine; if not, then let it be cut down.’”

The “time” question the vine dresser is asking goes beyond “how much time do we have” to “is it *too late*?” Is it too late to save that fig tree? Is it too late to change the direction it seems to be headed?

I am fascinated by this story and I have some questions of my own.

Why does the vine-dresser – let’s call him Vinny so I don’t have to keep saying “vine-dresser” – why does Vinny care? I’m sure he has enough on his hands taking care of the vines in the vineyard. That’s his job. He is a viticulturist not an arborist. So, why does he care?

In fact, wouldn’t it be to his advantage to have this scraggly fig tree removed; to just get it out of the way?

The owner may be a bit harsh, but he is the owner and he has every right to cut down something that is, as he says, “just taking up ground.”

So why does Vinny intercede? Why is he willing to take time to care for what appears to be a waste of space? Especially when, by all appearances, it is too late to save this tree?

I find myself asking the “is it too late” question a lot these days.

Is it too late to turn things around in our country?

Is it too late to turn around the devastating environmental impact of our way of life? Why should our children and families join the children and families of the Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue to go out and plant trees? Isn't it too late to make a difference? Environmental experts tell us that it may well be too late to turn around some things.

It may not be readily apparent but that's what I think this story is addressing in those first few verses.

You might have heard the breaking news, some witnesses said to Jesus, that Pilate had signaled from his place of power that it is ok for his troops to open fire on Galileans who are simply praying and practicing their faith.

Pilate might not have given a direct order. He may not have officially declared that Galileans should be wiped out. But he did create a climate where his soldiers knew they were empowered to slaughter people while they were doing nothing more than practice their faith ... If you get my drift.

Or what if, like those Galileans who were killed when a tower fell on them, someone leaves worship this morning and gets hit by a bus.

“Don't waste your time,” Jesus says, “trying to figure out what any of them did wrong. Don't try to sort out the reasons that bad things happen to good – or at least unfortunate – people. This is not about their sin.

This is about the opportunity that is staring you in the face right now to change your ways, to repent.

Perhaps Jesus knows us. We look around at all the horrible things that happen in other people's lives and we throw up our hands and say: "Well, see it doesn't matter what I do. What's the point? I could be struck down tomorrow and nothing would change."

I am grateful to Cherry Johnson for sending me this quote by Thomas Keating:

'Repent' means 'change the direction in which you are looking for happiness.' The call to repentance is the invitation to take stock of our emotional programs for happiness based on instinctual needs and to change them. This is the fundamental program of Lent.

Changing the direction of where we look for happiness is essential for our experience of Lent. It isn't just about giving up things. It's not just about trying to make yourself as miserable as you possibly can. It's about redirecting your search for that which will give you life and hope and happiness. It's about changing direction so that your life bears the fruit of grace and hope.

This may seem odd. But I've been thinking a lot this week about changing directions and boats. Mostly, that's your fault. For those of you who don't know, in gratitude for the two years that my partner Patrick was our Acting Director of Children's Programming and in celebration of the 10 years we have been here together in ministry, the congregation has gifted us with an Alaska Cruise. We can't wait.

So I have been thinking a lot about boats.

A speed boat can change directions pretty fast. An ocean liner takes a while.

And sometimes I think we get confused about which boat we are on.

We are on a speed boat and we think we must be on an ocean liner. We see the iceberg ahead of us and we say: “Well, here it comes. I guess there’s no way to change direction now.” But we are really on a speed boat. We can do it. Do it now!

Or we think we are on a speed boat and we are really on an ocean liner and we get frustrated that it is taking so long to change direction. But that’s how it is with an ocean liner. It takes time.

The problem is: we are always on both boats at the same time. And what keeps us from changing directions is that we give up on the ocean liner because it is taking too long to change direction and we get so focused on that we forget we are also on a speed boat that can change direction right now.

In other words, the slow pace of change in our institutions and in our life together fools us into thinking that it is impossible for them to change. Ever. And we get so distracted by that frustration that we forget we are also on our own speed boat that can change direction right now. Today!

And if, in your speed boat, you do change directions right now, you might discover that the ocean liner will also move a few more degrees in that new direction.

Our friend Vinny knows that he is up against an owner who has little patience for trying to save something that looks like it is worthless. That’s the ocean liner of the human condition – don’t waste your time and energy on people or things that look hopeless to you.

But Vinny is not willing to give up. Is it too late to change the direction of the fig tree? We don’t know. But Vinny is pleading for a second chance. And, even though it isn’t his job, he is going to work the ground and fertilize it and care for it and hope fruit back on to its branches.

Thirty-nine years ago today, March 24, 1980, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, was murdered while he was saying Mass. It's not clear if there was a direct order from the military government – a government that had the support of our own. But it didn't matter if it was a sanctioned military operation because the government had made it clear – it had sent out signals - that Romero had to be silenced. The ocean liner of church and state was not going to change direction.

Romero himself had experienced a change of direction. He was the “safe” candidate to be Archbishop. Someone who would not rock the boat. Someone who would look the other way as the ship of state continued to head in its destructive direction.

But Romero saw the violence and the poverty and the corruption and it changed the whole direction of his life and his ministry. He became a champion of the poor; a prophet who railed against corruption; and a peacemaker who tried to end the violence on both sides of the struggle for justice by appealing to our shared humanity.

As often does, it got him killed.

There is a prayer attributed to Oscar Romero that was actually written by the late Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan. It was written as a celebration of Romero's life and was inspired by that life.

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.

Oscar Romero did not alter the course of his country or his church. But the change of direction in his own life did move them both a few degrees in a new direction.

Last year, Oscar Romero became a saint. He was canonized by the Roman Church as someone whose life and ministry should inspire us to see our own lives as the power to change the world.

Oscar Romero is a real life example of what Vinny is up to in the story from Luke

And thank God for the Vinny's of the world. Because we humans are prone to look at the awful things happening around us and just give up. We look at the direction we are headed and say, "well there is no changing course now" and we lose any joy, any happiness, any hope we might have because we imagine we are like that fig tree in the vineyard and the owner is right about us – we are just taking up valuable real estate and might as well be cut down.

But Vinny knows better. Vinny knows a change of direction is possible. It can start with you. It is not too late to sow those seeds and to care for the seeds that are already planted that someday will grow. Whatever happens to the fig tree down the road, it's not too late to care for it now.

In the face of what seems like immovable racial and economic injustice, Dr. Martin Luther King said, "... we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance ..."

In the face of the intractable system of apartheid, South African black and brown people sang: "We shall not give up the fight; we have only started."

Beloved ones, we may be out of time right now but it is not too late.

Because, today, if you hear God's voice – if you hear those voices singing "we shall not give up the fight" – do not harden your hearts.

We have only started.

NOTES

"Is it too late for the planet?" See www.plana.earth.org. About Oscar Romero, see www.franciscanmedia.org and Father James Martin's article on the prayer, online from March 24, 2013 (Facebook). Dr. King's quote comes from his sermon, "A tough mind and a tender heart," *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963/1981), p.20.