

“A Gracious Call to Repentance” Luke 13:1-9

When our children were growing up, sometimes our two sons would get into an argument over something. Or one of the kids would throw a fit when it was time to go to bed or when we wouldn't let them have something that they wanted at the store.

Bernadette had a unique way of responding to these incidents of misbehavior. She would start spelling the word *Respect* out loud. “*R-E-S-P-E ...*” And all three of our children knew what that meant. It was time to stop what they were doing and start showing some respect. She did that so often that once she started to spell it out and only got as far as the first two letters when one of our kids yelled out, “*I hate respect!*”

And that always brought to mind what my mother would do whenever I misbehaved once upon a time. It may be hard for some who know me now to believe (wink), but there were times when I did things and said things that I shouldn't have and times when I had to be pushed and prodded to do the things that I should have done.

I would try to argue my way out of an early bedtime or an early curfew. Sometimes, I stubbornly refused to turn down the volume on my stereo or set the table for dinner, even after I was asked nicely to do so. And maybe once or twice or three or four times, I acted up when my family was out in public.

Mom would only let me get away with so much before she would start counting. “*Young man,*” she would say, “*I'm going to count to three. One ... Two ...*”

That was her way of grabbing my attention and letting me know that I had better straighten up and fly right. It was high time that I started behaving. It was time to change or else there would be consequences.

This morning, I can hear the same tone in Jesus' words here in Luke's gospel. There is the same sense of urgency in his voice as in my mother's or my wife's.

It is time to change or else there will be consequences. It is time to straighten up and fly right. It is time to repent.

Around 2,000 years ago, some people came to Jesus and asked him about the brutal murder of a group of Galileans. They had entered the temple for worship. And as they made their sacrifices to God, some of Pilate's men in the Roman army ambushed them and killed them. Their own blood had been shed upon the altar and had mixed with the blood of the animals they had offered to the Lord.

Sound familiar? People murdered in a place of worship?

It sounds too familiar to me. A little more than a week ago, fifty Muslim immigrants were shot and killed as they worshiped in two mosques in the city of Christchurch in New Zealand. As they prayed, a white supremacist murdered them in cold blood.

Back in October, eleven people were shot and killed by another white supremacist as they gathered for worship in a Pittsburgh synagogue. And it was less than four years ago when another white supremacist shot and killed nine people as they attended a Bible study at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

In his day, Jesus spoke about 18 people who died in Siloam when a tower fell on them. Now, he could point to the devastation of Tropical Cyclone Idai that killed more than 600 people this month when it slammed into the African coast.

Or Hurricane Maria that killed over 3,000 people in Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands. Or Hurricane Irma or Hurricane Harvey, both of which killed several dozen people. All three of those storms--Maria, Irma, and Harvey--occurred in 2017 within three months of each other.

We call such terribly destructive storms “*acts of God*”. And we would probably call a tower falling an act of God as well.

Before we are so quick to blame the falling tower in Siloam on God, we may consider that it may not have been built right. Maybe, someone was taking shortcuts to try and get the job done quickly rather than safely. It was not so much an act of God as the result of shoddy construction, not caused by divine judgment but by human sin.

Jesus resists making God responsible for hurricanes, cyclones, or falling towers. Instead, Jesus issues a call to repentance. There needs to be a change. People need to straighten up and fly right.

The really interesting thing here is *who* it is that Jesus calls to repentance. It wasn't the Galileans who were slaughtered in the temple who needed to repent. They were no worse sinners than anyone else.

And it wasn't the folks in Siloam who happened to be under that tower when it collapsed. They were no more guilty than anyone else.

Notice that Jesus does not take this opportunity to call Pilate or the Roman government to repentance. It is not just Pilate or the Romans who need to change.

Jesus speaks directly to the people who have asked him about these things. *You* need to repent, he says.

And the *you* who need to repent is plural. *Y'all* need to repent. *All of you* need to change. Or there will be some terrible consequences. *All of you* will perish.

Could Jesus' voice be speaking directly to *us* today? Is Jesus speaking directly to our entire world today?

We hear stories like the shootings in mosques, synagogues, and churches. And we think that surely the shooters need to repent. White supremacists like those three men need to repent.

Yet Jesus will not let us blame these tragedies on a couple of lone wolves. People like these men do not arrive here from Mars or some other planet. They are born into *this* world and raised in *this* world.

They did not create their own warped view of Muslims or Jews or African-Americans. They learned it. They learned it from the politicians and talking heads on television who tell us that all Muslims are dangerous terrorists and they are looking to take over the world. They learned it from the voices on the internet who tell us that Jews control Hollywood and the media and the banks and they need to be stopped. They learned it from the jokes and comments they hear about black people being on welfare or being drug dealers or just not as smart as the rest of us.

As one writer said after the shootings in New Zealand last week, the danger we face is bigger than just a few crazy individuals. It is our very culture that continues to tolerate racism and religious bigotry.¹ And we need to change before we end up destroying one another. Jesus calls us to repentance before we perish.

I have been the interim pastor here since September 11, 2017. Since that time, we have witnessed 59 people shot and killed at a concert in Las Vegas, 27 people shot and killed at a Baptist church in Texas, 17 people shot and killed at a high school in Parkland, Florida, the 11 people mentioned previously shot and killed in the Pittsburgh synagogue, and 13 people

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/opinion/new-zealand-mosque-shooting.html>

shot and killed in a California bar. And there were 374 other mass shootings in the last 18 months.²

And every time we hear plenty of suggestions about what we can do to prevent these types of things from happening. There are suggestions about guns and about mental health. But in the end, we do nothing. And people perish.

Whatever our views are on guns or mental health, maybe some things need to change. Maybe, Jesus is calling us to repentance.

Over the last 30 or 40 years, we have heard so much about how human beings like us are effecting the environment. We put so many greenhouse gases into the atmosphere that the average temperature keeps getting warmer and warmer. And as the water in the oceans gets warmer, hurricanes and cyclones--like the one that hit Africa last week--they get stronger.

A group of 18 prominent scientific organizations in the United States has acknowledged that we human beings are the primary cause of this.³ There are many ways that we could begin to address this including using solar power and other alternative forms of energy and cutting our use of fossil fuels like coal or gas.

But our politicians and businesspeople still want to argue with the scientific evidence and deny that we are causing any kind of change in the climate. Perhaps, some things need to change before we destroy the planet. Maybe, Jesus is calling us to repentance before all of us perish.

Jesus' call is urgent. And yet, the good news is that his call is also gracious. It reminds me of one other thing about my mother's countdown that she used to grab my attention if I was misbehaving.

Sometimes, Mom would take her time getting to three. *"One ..."* she would say. *"Two ... Two and a half ... Two and three quarters ... Two and seven eighths ..."*

Looking back, I think that it was her way of letting me know that her goal wasn't just to punish me. It wasn't just because she was angry with me. It was because she loved me and wanted what was best for me. She was serious about my need for repentance. But she was also gracious in helping me to repent.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mass_shootings_in_the_United_States

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https://web.archive.org/web/20140714124825/http://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/content_files/1021climate_letter.pdf

And if God is like the gardener in this parable that Jesus tells here in Luke, God is also gracious. We are like the fig tree that bears no fruit.

God looks at the world and sees all the death and destruction. God looks at the world and sees all our violence and the damage we do to his creation. God looks at the world and sometimes he sees precious little love or joy. Peace and kindness seem to nowhere to be found.

But the gardener refuses to cut down this tree. The gardener does not want to get rid of the unfruitful fig tree. The gardener wants to save it. And, this gardener gets to work.

God is the divine gardener who starts digging in the dirt. God reaches down into the muck, the mud, and the manure (that is what *fertilizer* was back then) in order to turn things around for this tree. God goes down into the mess we have made of things in order to help the tree bear fruit.

And isn't that what God did for us in Jesus Christ? God came down into the mess of human life. God reached down to help turn us around.

God does not expect us to repent all on our own. God is always there to help us change. God never, ever wants us to perish. God wants to save us from perishing.

God wants all of us to repent. And so, Jesus calls us firmly but graciously. I hope and pray that we hear.

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