

Life Can Turn On A Dime
Sermon, February 28, 2016
Third Sunday in Lent
Texts: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

(Prior to the Gospel reading, I gave a little background to help enhance understanding of the text.)

Jesus refers to two incidents which would have been familiar to His audience ... Pilate mixing the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices, and a collapsing tower that killed eighteen bystanders. The first refers to a well-intentioned effort of Pontius Pilate. Jerusalem was chronically short of water, and when pilgrims crowded the city for the festivals, the shortage was acute. Upwards of three million faithful Jews or more would converge upon the city for Passover. That's more than three times the population of Rhode Island crammed into this relatively small walled city! There was also a Roman detachment of some three thousand soldiers on duty at festival time. Pilate had an aqueduct built to convey water to the city from a spring about thirty-five miles away. However, he somewhat heavy-handedly took money from the Temple treasury to fund this project (as it was the religious festivals that exacerbated this need); he went over the heads of the Temple leadership to do so, and this provoked some of the more zealous Jews, colloquially known as the Galileans. They resented what Pilate meant to be a practical service and incited an uprising on the Temple steps. The exasperated Pilate mingled his soldiers dressed in plain clothes with the rioters, the disguised soldiers carried concealed weapons, and at a given signal they attacked. Many Galileans were clubbed or stabbed to death on the steps of the Temple. The second incident was that a tower structure in southern Jerusalem had accidentally collapsed and crushed eighteen bystanders, some apparently believed the victims must have "done something" to have deserved their fate.

Today we are collecting dimes for the annual Lenten collection the Sunday School takes for Heifer International. You've all heard the "dime" idioms, such as "This car can turn on a dime" or "These brakes can stop on a dime" which make use of the imagery of our smallest coin's dimensions to hyperbolically describe how something can stop and/or change direction VERY quickly. The sermon title is a related idiom; basically the phrase means that life itself can change course very quickly. That's something many of you know very well from painful personal circumstances. The smallest decision, the tiniest action, the most random choice can change the course of one's life dramatically. Depending on the circumstance, it can be a change for the good or a change for the bad ... and sometimes you just don't know how good or how bad until much later. Life can indeed turn on a dime, and God would have it turn for the better, which is why He calls us to "turn" ... which, by the way, is the original meaning of the word we translate "Repent."

For the entire previous chapter prior to our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus has been calling for repentance ... for lives to BE TURNED AROUND to embrace God's mercy and gift of life. Again, this was the original meaning of the word "repent" ... it meant to turn (or, to STOP and turn). To repent doesn't necessarily mean to beat yourself up with shame and remorse and sorrow. The word in its original usage simply meant to stop, turn around and/or turn back. If you were leaving the house and realized you forgot something and turned back to get it, well, that was a repentance experience. Yes, there's often a degree of regret and sorrow involved in genuine repentance, of course, but not always. Sometimes it's just our common sense kicking in with no sense of shame or remorse compelling it and we just change direction. To digress a little, I think all of us have experienced that regret can often come later, sometimes much later, as we ask ourselves, "*Why didn't I turn earlier? Why didn't I spend more time doing that; why didn't I spend less time doing that? Why did I make that promise? Why didn't I keep that promise?*" Or, in a positive vein, sometimes we realize just how fortunate and grateful we are because we made a seemingly small decision long ago that profoundly affected our lives for good. But again, the original meaning of the word "repent" is primarily about stopping and turning. Jesus isn't as interested in our *shame* as He is in our *direction*. The One Who calls Himself the Way just wants us to repent, to turn around, and start moving in the **right** way, the right direction, because He loves us and wants us to enjoy life as we were created to enjoy it. But that turning is difficult because more often than not we have a lot invested in the *wrong* direction. After all, this wrong direction is all we've known, and we've been going this way for a long, long time. It's the way we thought we were supposed to go. It's the way others around us have been going. So, if we are going to stop "on a dime" and turn around, or turn back, we will need some help. And God has ways ... sometimes unusual and seemingly hard ways ... that will help us turn.

Now, in today's reading, it looks like those listening to Jesus think He is talking about someone *else* who needs to repent ... that He's talking about those over-the-top zealous Galileans Pilate had killed, or the eighteen killed in Siloam when that tower fell on them ... who must have somehow deserved it. There may have been those in the audience who are trying to avoid Jesus' challenging words about repentance by playing the "*But look; we are not bad as THEM*" game. Yes, we know that game. But Jesus will have none of it, and turns it right back to His hearers to say that all are in need of repentance. This is not about comparisons between ourselves and others. This is about living OUR lives in response to God's invitation. Are we always honest and honorable? Don't dare use someone

else's dishonesty to excuse our own. Can OUR promises be trusted? Are we consistently the kind of people we would trust? Are we consistently the kind of people we would trust to take care of our children? Are we honorable, trustworthy, honest, truthful, polite, kind, loving, gracious, forgiving, faithful, responsible? Again, repenting means turning ... turning from the ways of life that really are not good for you and really not good for those whose lives you may touch. And like the gardener in Jesus' next parable, God the Holy Spirit is patient, gracious and merciful, always cultivating contexts in our lives which might provide opportunity for us to turn in the right direction(s).

In this parable, the owner of the vineyard is fed up. There is this apparently useless fig tree planted right there in the middle of his vineyard. This tree has not produced any fruit; it's not feeding or helping or nourishing anybody, all it is doing is taking up space and good soil in the vineyard while producing nothing but leaves. So the owner of the vineyard tells his gardener to cut the tree down. But the gardener pleads, "*Sir, leave it alone just one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.*" Actually, the Greek literally translates: "*That I may dig deep around it and throw dung on it.*" Apparently, digging a ditch and heaping on the dung was literally the last-ditch method of fertilization for a fruitless fig tree. "*Master, give this tree one last chance to produce fruit worthy of the ground it is taking up. Let me dig a ditch around it, pile a lot of manure on it, and let's see what happens.*" The master is probably thinking to himself, "*How much dung will it take to get this tree to 'turn around' and be productive?*" But he nevertheless graciously allows the gardener license to make this last ditch effort.

What a picture! The image is one of the Owner of the Vineyard allowing manure to be heaped over the roots of OUR fruitless lives as a last-ditch effort to help us grow into who we are created to be. This may strike some as a bit earthy; but this isn't my parable, this is Jesus' parable. What is insinuated here is that God is able to use anything and everything that gets heaped onto our lives as last ditch efforts to turn us around, to get us properly rooted and grounded and producing good fruit ... fruit, by the way, that will be a staple source of nourishment for all. I think the central question of this little parable is this: How much waste in your life will it take? How much, um, *fertilizer* in your life is enough? What will it take to turn you around? I can't tell you how many testimonies I've heard from people in churches I've served who have come to that nadir point in their lives where they just grow weary of the waste, the manure, that has piled up in their lives largely as a result of ignoring God and His good ways. Relationships that have grown toxic, bad decisions that have led to horrible consequences, things they have sought after and/or worked hard for but have done little more than just suck the life out of them, achievements that have left them empty. When they finally reach bottom, when they reached that nadir point, something in their spirit clicked ... and they turned. The realization of the sheer amount of waste engulfing the very roots of their lives is what it took to get them to repent, to turn (or re-turn), to our Lord and His church. That waste became a fertilizer that helped them grow.

The prophet Isaiah asks: "*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?*" Good question! Why is it we spend so much time and energy and wealth and effort absorbed by things that really mean so little? As someone put it, "*Thirty seconds after we die, we are going to ask ourselves, 'Why did I waste so much time on (fill in the blank)? What was I thinking?'*" The Lenten season is as good a time as any for us to reflect on what we are thinking, on how we are spending our time, or more correctly still, on how we are spending our lives. When we spend money, we give it away in exchange it for something else we think of equal or better value. It is the same with how we spend the limited time and energy and resources of our lives; we should be getting something of equal or greater value in return. I could go on with this all day; how much time and effort do we spend well? And how much of it is just resulting in ... potential fertilizer? We need to ask ourselves daily, "*Am I giving my life away well?*" To paraphrase the prophet's good question: "*Why DO we spend our lives on that which does not satisfy?*"

Isaiah's good question is accompanied by a good invitation: "*Come! Come without money and without cost.*" God's invitation to the full and productive and rewarding life He offers is free. God gives it away to any who will turn to receive it. The voice of the prophet rings across the centuries, "*Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while he is near.*" "*Let the wicked man forsake his way, let him stop on a dime, and the evil man his thoughts, Let him turn on that same dime to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will freely pardon.*" All that is required is some turning or re-turning action on our part ... a turning or re-turning action that refocuses our priorities, action that redirects our resources, action that changes the way we "spend our lives."

"*Seek the Lord while He may be found*" can be translated, "*Seek the Lord where He may be found.*" And, of course, that is why we are all here. To seek the Lord *where* He may be found, *while* He may be found ... while we have life and breath and time to do so. And the good news Jesus makes clear is that even in our distractions ... those waste-producing, life-dissipating, fruitless sprees in our lives that ultimately leave us "empty" ... the Lord is always seeking us, bringing things into our lives to turn us around, even as a last resort using the accumulated waste in our lives as fertilizer to get us to grow, that we may bear good fruit ... that we may be productive, prosperous, and a blessed source of nourishment and refreshment to all around us.

You know, Jesus didn't tell us what happens. Does the fig tree finally produce? How does this story end?

How will *our* stories end?