

TURNING ON A DIME
Sermon, March 24, 2019
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: (1) Pilate mixing the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices, and (2) 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 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 stop on a dime"* which means in can stop abruptly and completely. Or perhaps the same car can *"turn on a dime"* which alludes to the agile and nimble ability to make a sharp turn, to make a sudden change in direction, without wrecking, flipping or spinning out of control. Both make use of the imagery of our smallest coin's dimensions to describe how something can stop and/or change direction VERY quickly. *"Stopping on a dime"* can be a good thing, but eventually you have to *"get off the dime"* ... or everyone will start honking at you. *"Get off the dime!"* means get going, get a move on, don't stay stuck there out of fear or indecision, stop procrastinating ... get off the dime! You have to take action; don't stay stuck in indecision, deliberation, hemming and hawing, just make up your mind and GO! Another idiom is to *"Drop the dime"* ... which comes from the 1960s and earlier, back in the pre-cellular days when a call on a pay telephone cost ten cents ... a tipster or snitch would anonymously sneak into a phone booth, call the police, and thus *"drop the dime"* on someone.

TURNING ON A DIME is the sermon title. Something many of us know all too well is that life itself can change course very quickly; LIFE can turn on a dime. The smallest decision, the tiniest action, a bad choice, a minor injury or illness unattended to ... such things 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 sometimes even stop on a dime. But God would have us get off the dime ... assess the situation, weigh options, get a clearer sense of direction and then get a move on, get going in that right direction. That, by the way, is what the New Testament calls "repentance."

The original meaning of the Greek word we translate "repent" in its original usage simply meant to stop, turn 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. To repent doesn't necessarily mean to beat yourself up with shame and remorse and sorrow and regret. Now, there's often a degree of regret and sorrow involved in genuine repentance, of course, but not always. Sometimes our acts of repentance are just our common sense kicking in with no sense of shame or remorse compelling it and we just change direction to head a better way, a higher way, a more honorable way. 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 this; less time doing that? Why did I say that? Why didn't I say this?"* And so on. That stuff can stay with you for a lifetime! *(Just as a quick case in point, driving here in the car this morning, something on the radio triggered a memory of a really stupid and insensitive thing I said to a college girlfriend ... that was forty-four years ago, and it still comes back to haunt! Some things just stay with you forever!)* Or, in a positive vein, sometimes we realize just how fortunate and grateful we are because we made a seemingly small decision long, long ago to stop and change our direction, a decision which eventually and 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 stop, turn, get off the dime and start moving our lives 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 may be all we've known, and we've been going this way for a 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 and *"get off the dime"* heading in the right way, the good direction, we will need help. And God has ways ... sometimes unusual and seemingly hard ways ... that will help us repent.

For the entire previous chapter prior to our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus has been calling for repentance. 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 were probably those in the crowd 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 and direction. Are we always honest and honorable? We should never 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 honorable, trustworthy, honest, truthful, polite, kind, loving, gracious, forgiving, faithful, responsible? Again, repenting means stopping and turning on a dime ... 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 moving on in the ways that are good, wholesome, loving, productive ... in short, ways pleasing to God.

Jesus then tells a parable. 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 bushy foliage. 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."* Some of you may remember from when we've looked at this before that the Greek text literally says: *"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, *"How much dung will it take to get this tree off the dime?"* But he allows the gardener to make this last ditch effort to "save" the tree.

What a picture! The image is one of the Master allowing manure to be heaped over the roots of **OUR** fruitless lives as a last-ditch effort to save us, to help us grow into who we are created to be and to produce something worthwhile and nourishing and helpful with our now-fruitless lives. This may strike some as a bit earthy; but this isn't my parable, it's Jesus'. I believe 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 potentially be a source of nourishment for many. I think the central question of this little parable is this: What will it take to turn us around and make us grow? How much waste in our life will it take? How much, um, *fertilizer* in our life is enough? Now that doesn't mean all the bad "stuff" that gets piled into our lives comes from the Master's directive, but the gentle gardener of the Holy Spirit can and often does use that "stuff" to help us grow! I can't tell you how many testimonies I've heard from people in churches I've served over my nearly thirty-five years of ordained ministry who came to that bottom point where they just grew weary of the waste, the manure, the failure piling up in their lives ... toxic relationships, bad decisions that led to horrible consequences, destructive habits and so on ... often as a direct result of ignoring God and His good ways. When they finally reach bottom, that nadir point, something in their spirit and heart and mind clicked (*and 99.999% of the time, I believe it was the Holy Spirit of God finally getting through to the person*) ... and they turned. The realization of the sheer amount of waste engulfing the roots of their lives is what it took to get them to **stop, turn, get off the dime** and repent, to turn (or re-turn), to our Lord and His church. The "waste" became a fertilizer that helped them grow.

(The following was edited out on the spot due to time constraints. "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? The Lenten season is as good a time as any for us to reflect 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 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 to any who will turn to receive it." -- end of excerpt)

The voice of the prophet Isaiah 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."* And will help you grow into the person you were created to be ... more fruitful, productive. All that is required is some repentance ... an action that refocuses our priorities, redirects our resources, action that gets us off the dime and redirects the paths of our lives to follow the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.