

DIME TIME
Sermon, March 20, 2022
The Third Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Texts: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

In the bulletin insert, I had printed the following background information to help enhance understanding of the Gospel 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.

As mentioned during the Time With The Children, today we are collecting dimes for the annual Lenten collection of the Sunday School for Heifer International. You've all heard the "dime" idioms which make use of the dimensions of our smallest and thinnest coin, such as *"This car can stop on a dime"* which means it 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 without wrecking, flipping or spinning out of control. Both make use of Dime Time to describe how something can stop and/or change direction VERY quickly. *"Stopping on a dime"* can be a good quality of a well-fashioned car, 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! Just make up your mind and GO! Another idiom is to *"Drop the dime"* ... which comes from the 1960s and earlier, in the pre-cellular phone 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. To *"drop the dime"* on someone was to report that person, tattle on him/her.

Well, something many of us know all too well is that life itself can "turn on a dime;" it can change course very quickly. The smallest decision, the tiniest action, a random choice, a freak accident, an injury ... such things can change the course of one's life suddenly and 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 at such times God would have us eventually 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 the essence of 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 in essence a "repentance" experience. 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 compelling sense of shame or remorse 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 and/or shame 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! Or, in a positive vein, sometimes we reflect and realize just how fortunate and grateful we are because we made a seemingly small decision 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*. Know that Jesus doesn't take delight in the blame and shame game (*just waiting to drop the dime on you to His heavenly father*). He is not 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 good direction, because He loves us and wants us to enjoy life as we were created to enjoy it! But that turning can be 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 might be 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,"* 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 ... to help us repent, grow and flourish.

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 maybe He is talking about someone *e/*se who needs

to repent ... that maybe He's talking about those over-the-top zealous hothead Galileans Pilate had killed, or the eighteen who got crushed to death in Siloam when that tower fell on them ... who must have somehow deserved their ill fate; maybe they "got what was coming to them" for various reasons. 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. 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 US, each one of us, stopping, turning from the ways of life that really are not good for us individually and really not good for those around us, and moving on in the ways that are good, wholesome, loving, productive ... in short, ways pleasing to God.

Jesus then tells a parable. To be honest, it took me a long time to understand why this parable is spoken in this context, and how it relates to repentance. I was well into my middle-aged years before coming across a plausible explanation, which I've shared the last few times we've come to this passage in the lectionary cycle over the years and will share it again today (*I'm not sure it's the correct interpretation, but it works for me!*) In this parable the vineyard owner, the Master, is fed up. There is this apparently useless fig tree planted right there in the middle of his vineyard. It has not produced any fruit for years; it's not feeding or helping or nourishing anybody, all it is doing is taking up space and good soil and sucking up precious (*and in the Middle East, hard to come by*) water other more productive plants in the vineyard could use. So the Master tells his gardener to cut the silly 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 that the Greek text literally has the gardener saying: "Let me dig deep around it and throw heaps of **dung** on it." Apparently, digging a ditch and heaping on the dung was literally the last-ditch method of fertilization for getting a fruitless and unproductive tree to produce.. "Sir, give this tree one last chance to produce. Let me dig a ditch around it, pile a lot of manure over its roots, 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 potential image/allegory is one of the Master allowing manure to be piled up 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 bear good and nourishing fruit in our lives (*and this may strike some as a bit, um, earthy; but this isn't my parable, it's Jesus'*). I believe what's insinuated here is that God is able to use anything and everything that gets heaped onto our lives, even the "stuff" that just stinks, as last ditch efforts to turn us around, to get us properly rooted and producing good fruit ... fruit, by the way, that will potentially be a source of nourishment for many. 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 even the stinky "stuff" to help us to grow! I think the central question of this little parable is this: What will it take to make us repent, to turn us around and make us grow? How much *waste* in our lives will it take? How much, er, dung in our life is enough? In my nearly thirty-eight years of ordained ministry I can't tell you how many testimonies I've heard from people in churches I've served who came to that bottom point where they just grew weary of the waste piling up all over 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 just clicked ... and by the grace of God they turned, they repented. The realization of the sheer amount of waste engulfing their lives is what it took to get them to Dime Time ... to *stop on a dime, turn on a dime, get off the dime and repent* ... to turn (*or re-turn*), to our Lord and His ways. The "waste" in their lives actually became a fertilizer that helped them come to faith and grow.

(The following was edited out 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 it for something else we think of equal or better value. It is the same with how we spend the limited time, energy and resources of our lives; we should be getting something of equal or greater value in return. 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, productive, meaningful life He offers is free. God gives it to any who will turn to receive it." -- end of excerpt)

In the little time remaining, I refer to part of our reading from Isaiah. 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." Some translate this, "Seek the Lord where He may be found." And, of course, that is why we are all here. We are seeking 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 those life-dissipating, waste-producing, 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, turn us back to Him... that we may be as He designed us to be: fruitful, productive, fulfilled, prosperous, and a blessed source of nourishment and refreshment to all around us.