

## Pay No Attention To That Man

### **Luke 13:1-9**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

One of my favorite movies of all time, hands down, is *The Wizard of Oz*. There’s such a sense of awe and wonder when Dorothy steps out of the black-and-white world of Kansas into the Technicolor land of Oz. There are wonderful characters, each with their own unique quirks. Or maybe the reason I love the movie is because I remember watching it with my Mom and my sisters, all of us cuddled under an old, yellow, silky comforter.

One of the lines that has become frequently quoted in completely unrelated situations comes from when Dorothy figures out that the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz isn’t quite as awe-inspiring as everyone thought. Toto the dog pulls back a curtain with his teeth, revealing just an ordinary guy, controlling some pretty technologically advanced equipment. And he calls out in his thunderous voice, “Pay no attention to the man behind that curtain.”

Up until now, the Wizard never had to say that. People were so enthralled with his technical tricks that they didn’t even notice the curtain, much less the man behind it. This morning, Jesus is trying to give us that same quotation, “Pay no attention to that man,” but he has a completely different reason. It’s more like the reason my dad had when he told us, “Don’t worry about your sister. You just worry about yourself.”

Our reading this morning begins with Jesus receiving the latest news. Pilate has just slaughtered a group of Jews at the temple. By the time he was done, there was so much blood

everywhere that the blood of the people was mixing with the blood of the animals they had brought in for ritual sacrifice.

Now to be perfectly honest with you, there's no proof this event took place. No other historical source records this incident. But the ancient historian Josephus records plenty other times when Pilate's interactions with the Jews ended in bloodshed. This story seems to fit. And unfortunately, too many churches can readily identify with this event. The news today occasionally reports that someone has opened fire in a church. That's how this event, this murderous rampage at the temple, would have felt to Jesus and his companions.

The crowd tells Jesus this story, because they want to know how he will react. They want to know what he's going to do about this. Some of them were probably hoping to appeal to his sense of identity as part of the greater Jewish community. Remember, Jesus' followers still think he's going to overthrow the Roman government. What better to give him a little push to get going with that mission than an account of Roman brutality?

But Jesus refuses to get caught up in the crowd's anxiety. He pretty much ignores Pilate, the Romans, and their part in this story. Instead, Jesus asks the crowd to think about the people who were killed. He asks the crowd if the victims were worse sinners than others. It was a commonly-held belief among Jews that people who were suffering were being punished by God. Maybe for their own sins, and maybe even for the sins of their ancestors. You can read this idea throughout the book of Job. Job is faced with all sorts of social and physical suffering. His friends tell him that if he will repent, God will relent. Job would love to repent and be done with his pain, but he insists he has done nothing wrong.

The Israelites aren't the only ones who cling to this idea. After the recent earthquake in Haiti, Pat Robertson declared that the quake was God's punishment for a country that had made

a pact with the devil. Pastors and religious groups declared that Hurricane Katrina was God's wrathful response to rampant sin in New Orleans.

This morning, Jesus is pointing out this belief, that when bad things happen, it is God punishing us. Since the people at the temple died, and in such a terrible way, they must be worse sinners than those who weren't at the temple that day, right? But before you answer that, Jesus says, let me give you another example. Remember when the tower of Siloam fell, killing 18 people? What about them? Were they worse sinners than everyone else?

Jesus' answer here is an emphatic and very clear "No!" Now, we could get lost on this whole topic. The topic of how sometimes bad things happen to good people and vice versa. If God is all good and all powerful, why do bad things happen in the world? But you'll notice in this story, Jesus doesn't even try to answer that question. Jesus redirects the crowd. Instead of looking at others, and whether they deserve what has happened to them, Jesus tells the crowd to take a look at their own lives. Don't worry about your sisters and brothers; worry about yourself.

In Romans, Paul reminds us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But as Jesus moves into our parable this morning, he tells us what to do about it. Jesus tells the story of an absentee landowner – a common practice in his setting – who returns to his land to take an accounting of things. He finds that one of his fig trees is not growing fruit. If you depend on your fruit trees to bring you income, a fruitless tree is a waste of space. So the landowner wants to uproot the tree and plant a new one. But the gardener intervenes, asking for one more chance. He says he will pull out all the stops and do everything he possibly can to get the tree to fruit. If after a year it is still barren, then he will concede and plant a new tree instead.

While I was writing this sermon, I learned some interesting things about figs and fig trees. For example, did you know that figs are not technically fruit? They are actually

characterized as flowers. That's why fig trees can produce so quickly. An apple tree may take five or more years to mature to the point where it will produce apples. But a fig tree may produce in as little as one year – depending of course on the variety and the environment. I thought the landowner was being kind of impatient, expecting fruit after three years. But it turns out, in Jesus' setting, a fig tree should have flowered much earlier. The landowner was already giving the tree more than a fair chance to blossom.

Jesus talks repeatedly in the gospels about how we must bear fruit. Following Jesus is about more than just listening to his stories. It's about more than believing in him. It's about carrying on his ministry where he left off. In James, we are reminded to be not only hearers of the word but also doers of the word. We aren't supposed to let our faith be something we confine to an hour or two on a Sunday morning. Our faith should shape everything we do in every moment of our lives. Every moment is an opportunity to live according to the example given to us by Jesus.

So exactly what kind of fruit should we be producing? Paul says the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. But I think Jesus had something a little bit more practical in mind. Fruits are actually taking care of your neighbors in need, not just thinking about them. Fruits mean opening your wallet and your schedule, offering your gifts and yourself to make the world more like the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is telling the crowd this morning that yes, bad things happen sometimes. But don't worry about that. You can't control when bad things will happen. What you can control is yourself and your life. If you truly repent of your sin, that means you will want to get as far away from it as you can. And the furthest you can get from sin is to produce fruit in God's name. And just like we don't know when bad things are going to happen, we don't know when our lives will

be over. There should be some sense of urgency around producing fruit. There is a time limit here.

So if three years is more than fair for a fig tree, what's fair for a person? How long do we have to produce fruit? I'm not sure that's the right question. I think what Jesus is illustrating with this parable is that we have every possible opportunity to be fruitful. After all, the landowner gives the tree three years to produce fruit, and then the gardener puts forth every possible effort in the final year. Jesus is saying that no matter how long you've been wasting space, there's still time to tend to your life. But now is the time to act. Now is the time to repent and make an effort. Because we don't know when the landowner will return. Amen and amen.