

Lent 3C
Luke 13:1-9
March 23, 2025

“It’s Not My Fault”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

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 round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

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Three ministers went to a convention and were all sharing one room. The first said, “Let's confess our secret sins one to another. I'll start – my secret sin is I just love to gamble. When I go out of town, it's cha-ching cha-ching, let the machines ring.” The second said, “My secret sin is that I just hate working. I find all my sermons online.” The third said, “My secret sin is gossiping and I just can't wait to get out of this room!”¹

¹ “Secret Sin,” Christiansunite.com: http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Pastors/Secret_Sin.shtml#google_vignette.

This particular ministers' convention sounds terrible! And not least because I'm just not that comfortable talking about sin. You may have noticed that it doesn't come up much in my preaching. That's because I think it's a generally unhelpful word. Because it's so general, I often feel like it doesn't actually mean anything. But also, because for folks that come to New England Church from certain other traditions, it actually means everything – cards, liquor, dancing, dice, and everything nice included! Suffice it to say, the word has baggage. Personally, I feel like it's more helpful to talk about specifics, or when I want to speak broadly, I use a word like “brokenness”. If you saw me dance, you'd understand that “broken” is a perfect description!

Jesus talks about sin sometimes, but not nearly as much as most people think. Today, though, is one of those times. People come to him wondering, as people sometimes do, if the folks the Romans had killed or the ones crushed by a falling tower were worse sinners than “normal” people. The prevailing assumption of that time was that they were. Bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. If they got caught up in Rome's business or squashed by a random falling tower, they must've deserved it, right? Wrong. Jesus says, “Nope!” But then he continues, “If you don't repent, you'll perish the same way.”

In the wake of natural disaster or calamity, there are always people asking why. And there are others who are only too happy to tell them. Take the recent fires in southern California, for example. In a video viewed over 5 million times on YouTube, Evangelist Ray Comfort says that Hollywood is to blame for the fact that God withheld rain. Jesus says “Nope, that's not how this works.” But he does reframe the events of the tower collapse and Rome's brutality as an opportunity to reflect on the fragility of life and the need for repentance.

Repentance. That's another word that I don't use very often. It calls to mind the weeping and wailing of zealots or the altar calls of my youth. Maybe for you it brings to mind a confessional and penance. Maybe your association with the word is something different altogether. Folks mistake

repentance to be all about guilt or to “mean moral uprightness, expressions of regret, or a ‘180-degree turnaround.’ Rather, here and many other places in the Bible, it refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different perspective . . . ‘repentance’ also has moral applications, but it cannot be reduced to a reengineered life and ethics.”² It’s bigger than that. Broader than that.

The deaths of those poor people killed by the Romans or squashed by the tower had nothing to do with their sin and Jesus challenges the folks who think so to repent, to see things differently. But that doesn’t erase the reality of sin, of brokenness. I don’t talk about it often, but that doesn’t change the fact that everybody messes up. The wise recognize it and know they need to repent: to change their mind, to see things a new way, to adopt a different perspective, to alter their behavior, to make amends. And that’s where grace comes in.

Grace. That’s a third word that I don’t use very often, at least not in this context. When we talk about grace at church, we’re typically referring to an unearned opportunity to do better; a generosity of spirit on the part of the divine or another person or even ourselves that opens us up to the possibility of a fresh start. Like sin, which we all do; like repentance, which we all need; grace is something we all long for.

Jesus concludes this episode with a story about a fig tree. A man owned a fig tree and after three years, it still hadn’t born any fruit. It needed to go, the man thought, and he ordered his gardener to cut it down. The gardener, though, wasn’t quite done trying. “Give me a year,” he asked, “I’ll cultivate the soil and fertilize the roots. If it doesn’t bear fruit next year, I’ll cut it down then.” Grace. That’s what the gardener shows the tree. Will it bear fruit? Will the tree’s owner demand it be cut down next year? And will the gardener once again intervene? We don’t know. Grace is the possibility and we all long for that.

² Matthew Skinner. “Commentary on Luke 13:1-9,” Workingpreacher.org, February 28, 2016: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-3>.

I'm not sure where this text lands with each of us right now, on this third Sunday in the season of Lent. Maybe we walk away today knowing, as Jesus did, that sometimes, bad things happen to good people, so we should appreciate today and make the most of it. Maybe we heed the Lenten call to repentance – to changing our minds about someone or something, to seeing things a new way, to adopting a different perspective, to altering our behavior, to making amends. Or maybe we just leave here knowing that grace means the opportunity to do better, the possibility of a fresh start. And maybe we needed to hear that because we need grace or because someone else needs it from us.

May the tree bear the fruit that you need, today, and may we go forth to bear the fruit our world needs. Amen.