

Repent

Luke 13: 1-9

March 23, 2025 – Don Ghostlaw

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I first read today's gospel, it didn't jump out to me as one of those that I fondly remember from the many that we hear throughout the liturgy cycle. I think I have a mental block on this one, which I will explain in a few minutes.

Today is a challenging gospel reading because we hear about Jesus listening to his audience describe the atrocities that Pilate committed on some Jews who were offering sacrifices at the temple. Pilate, who was known in history as a malicious despot, had

his soldiers kill these worshipping Jews and mix their human blood with the blood of the animal sacrifices, right on the alter.

But rather than commiserate with these storytellers, or offer any condolences, and even agree that those whose lives were taken must have deserved it as sinners – Jesus reminds his listeners that they too face sure death unless they repent.

Jesus then goes on to share a second story about an accident where 18 people lost their lives when a tower collapsed and fell on them. Again, rather than showing empathy, Jesus reminds everyone that they too will suffer a similar fate if they fail to repent.

Finally, Jesus shares a parable about the field owner and Gardner, and the poor fig tree. The owner wants the gardener to cut the tree down because it hasn't

borne any fruit in the three or so years that it normally takes for a fig tree to bear fruit. The gardener pleads with the owner to wait a year so that the Gardner can tend to the tree and its roots. We don't know if the plan worked, or even if the owner agreed with the gardener, but we don't have to know that to understand the story. Jesus is clearly the Gardner; we are the fig tree, and the field owner is God.

So, unlike most readings I preach about, this one is clear. All we must do is repent, and we will be saved from a miserable death or from being cut down. I wish these were all so easy – it seems that my work here is finished, Amen.

But as both Columbo and the late Apple CEO Steve Jobs used to say, there is “one more thing”. It's a small thing, but I need to mention it. What does

“repent” mean, and how do we do that? And what are we repenting of?

One bible dictionary I consulted defines “repentance” in the New Testament sense as “a word covering several biblical ideas that range from regret to reversal, from changing one’s mind about something to a complete moral or ethical conversion. The more profound notion of repentance in the sense of “reversal” is expressed through the Hebrew word *shub*, which expresses the idea of turning back or retracing one’s steps.”

Repentance is one of those terms we have heard consistently throughout our spiritual lives but seldom think about other than at its most cursory meaning: do better, stop screwing up.

Now I had to dig deeper than that into this brood of “deeper understanding” vipers.

When I was growing up as a Roman Catholic, I managed to check off each of the sacraments as they came up. I was pretty chill for baptism, although I don't completely remember. I do remember handling first communion well – a little background training at the eight-year-old level, lessons on lining up and processing in a straight and organized fashion in alphabetic order by last name, and I was in.

Confirmation was also easy – more background training, this time for a 14-year-old, more lining up and processing, and facing the guy in the giant hat who visited once every ten years (or so it seemed), and I was in the club.

Actually, it's not funny – the class I just finished at Bishop Kemper School of Ministry was Sacramental Theology, and I struggled quite a bit. The saying that “youth is wasted on the young” is so true when it comes to our approach to learning the sacraments. I really thought I understood them, but, as it turns out, not even remotely at the level that I should understand and appreciate them. Especially baptism and the holy eucharist – but that is a homily for a different day.

In any event, there was one rite that each Roman Catholic child had to endure, usually right around the time of first communion – and that was first confession. Not so good or easy. I was commanded to tell a complete stranger, whom I could not see, about all the things that I did that I was told were really bad, and he would offer some blessings and then tell me to go out and recite dozens of prayers as penance

(also so it seemed) that I hadn't quite yet remembered by heart.

It was pure torture. And I hated it every single time it came up again (and again and again). This process was the church's way to ensure that I repent from my many sins as an eight-year-old. Although my class picture had never been seen hanging in the post office, somehow, I had apparently sinned enough to go through this angst-giving confession process repeatedly. Sometimes I would make up sins just to get through the process without trying to sound perfect. Besides, as the oldest and biggest kid among the four of us boys (a fact that would shockingly and suddenly change during one fight with my next younger brother when he was about 13 and me 15), I tended to push around at least him and the third son a lot. So, there was a good chance that I had committed most of the sins that I admitted to.

Here is the thing about Roman Catholic confession, at least from my perspective today. It was an established and somewhat rote ceremony guaranteed to set me right with God once I prayed through my penance. But that really isn't what repentance is all about.

As it turns out, repentance means a deeper conversation with God through prayer, and a lot of work in our lives to live as God wants us to. That's the point Jesus was telling his audience.

Another Roman Catholic thing for me was learning to look at sin in degrees. In a way, that is what Jesus's audience is doing in today's reading. They were implying that those who were slaughtered in the temple, or happened to be under the Siloam tower at the very moment it fell were somehow sinners, or

worse sinners, and therefore maybe deserved what they got.

Jesus immediately (and thankfully) debunks that myth. While I have had that same perspective at times in my life, I am thankful for Jesus's reminder that this is not about degrees of sin, but rather about us as sinners – period. And even with this clarity, there remain uneasy questions. We can appreciate that God will not favor those who sin without repenting (I'm still getting to that, please be patient), but how can we explain the loss of an innocent child, or someone with limited capacity who doesn't even have the physical or even mental capacity to sin or know right from wrong?

When that number two brother I fought with as a young teen was struck down by a car and died at age of 22, I started a quest for the answer to a question

that I think I am just now all these years later beginning to understand. Why do bad things happen to good people?

I now believe that the answer to that question and the best understanding of repentance are linked.

I also remember from my childhood the third child in our family sitting at the top of the stairs with a very large carrying case full of Matchbox cars and trucks. Every single morning when he was two and until he was about four, he would haul out those cars and lord over his imaginary kingdom for hours.

I have often thought of God in the same way. If God is lord of all, why does he permit bad things to happen. But another way of asking the same question is why does Jesus insist that we must repent for our sins, or face almost certain death without

eternal life? It is because we have free will, and the framework of God that we have constructed, including when He should be doling out grace and mercy, is not really who God is. We are being unfair to God to think that he lords over our every move. In Isaiah chapter 55, verse three, God makes it clear that “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts”.

The real issue is twofold. Bad things happen just because they do, not because God permits them to or somehow forces them to. And we exercise the free will that God blessed us with, which is why we sin and must repent. We don't repent because bad things happen, we repent to better understand God's intent for our lives, and for our love of God.

One commentator I read this week really helped me put this into perspective. He quotes another author of a similar “why bad things happen to good people” book called *Praying for Jennifer* by John Cobb. Cobb says, “our problem is not in making sense of everyday life, but in comprehending the nature of God.” Cobb says that “as long as we conceive of God as some sort of celestial power broker sitting high in the heavens parceling out blessings here and inflicting punishments there, we will always be at a loss to explain why bad things happen to good people.”

In other words, and this is the important point, we want a God who plays by the rules – our rules, not one that demands total surrender to the sovereignty of his will. This commentator claims, and I agree, “that is the essence of our sinfulness, is that we conceive God in our image, then hold God to our expectations.”

So how does this tie to repentance? What is Jesus asking us to repent of? Perhaps to admit to ourselves that the God we worship is largely the product of our own design, and not the God that Jesus was referring to when he spoke in today's gospel.

I read an article this week that reminded me that our objective here on earth is not to get to heaven when we die, but to please God while we are still here. To accomplish that, I need a complete reversal of my sinful approach to God. I have always believed in my mind that God thinks as I do, understands me, will hear my prayers and answer them. I never really stop to think about how much I please God, and what I should be doing with my life to continue pleasing God. And that is what I need to repent of.

Jesus the Gardener is right with us, ready to nurture our love for God so that we may bear fruit. The fruit takes many shapes, but most of all, it enables us to allow others to see Jesus in us. We need to treat everyone with the same love that Jesus has for us.

In the fig tree parable, when Jesus said that the gardener asked the landowner to “leave it alone for one more year” he is asking God to forgive us and give us another shot at changing our way. As a professed Christian, I have been standing in God’s Garden surrounded by excellent soil for many years now – how many more years must I stand here before I change my perspective about what God wants from me, and bear some fruit?

Dear Lord, we thank you for Jesus’s direct response to his audience and to us about our need to

repent. As we wrestle with changing our own internal framework of God that suits our needs, and leads us to isolation, separation and death, let us be strong to make real change – to better understand through Jesus how God wants us to see him – using the framework and understanding of God that He intends for us. We ask that Jesus, as our Gardener, shows every one of us how to repent and leads us to new life so that we continue to thrive in God’s kingdom and bear the good fruit of God’s love.

AMEN. *****