

SERMON

Second Chances - Luke 13:1-9

There is a hilarious story about a farmer who had three sons: Ron, Don and Little John. All had their names on the church roll but none ever attended church or had time for God. Then one day Don was bitten by a rattlesnake. The doctor was called and he did all he could to help Don, but the outlook for his recovery was very dim indeed. So the pastor was called to evaluate the situation.

The pastor arrived, and began to pray: "O wise and righteous Father, we thank you that in your wisdom you sent this rattlesnake to bite Don. He hasn't been inside the church in years and has shown little interest in You. We trust that this experience will be a valuable lesson to him and will lead him to genuine repentance. And now, O Father, wilt thou send another rattlesnake to bite Ron, and another to bite Little John, and another really big one to bite the old man. For years we have done everything we know to get them to get serious with you. Thank you God for rattlesnakes. Amen."
(1)

That's some prayer, isn't it? We don't know if Don recovered or not, but if he did, maybe he decided that God had given him a second chance and was in church the following Sunday. Second chances are good.

Do you believe in second chances? Thankfully, God does.

Jesus told a parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but didn't find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'"

That makes sense, doesn't it? What good is a fruit tree that doesn't bear fruit? Notice that it had been three years that the owner had the fig tree growing in his vineyard and yet it yielded nothing. Three years is the length of time that it takes a fig tree to become an established, fruit-bearing tree. That it wasn't bearing at this point seemed highly unlikely that it would ever bear fruit. So the owner of the vineyard was making a practical business-like decision. The tree's taking up room. It's using fertile soil in which another tree might prosper. "Cut it down!" he says to the man who cared for his vineyard.

But the man who cared for the vineyard tries to intervene. "Sir," the man replies, "leave it alone for 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." Obviously

the man who cared for the vineyard saw possibilities in the tree that the owner of the tree could not. The owner could see only a tree that wasn't pulling its weight. But the man who looked after the tree was more familiar with it and believed the tree deserved another chance.

Thank God for second chances. Here's something we should note. **A second chance implies that something we've done is wrong.** We need to consider this truth for a few moments while we still have the word "sin" in our vocabulary. I'm being serious. The whole concept that God would ever pass judgment on human beings is fast disappearing from North American religion. Writer David Brooks in his best-selling book *The Road to Character* says that we have done our young people a disservice in letting this ancient word sin slip from our modern lexicon. We have made it very difficult for our young to even talk about right and wrong. I believe he is right.

You know me by now. I am a person who preaches 99% of the time about a God of grace and love. But from time to time we need to face facts. It is absurd to think that a Creator God has no expectations from those whom He has created.

To say that God gives us second chances is to imply the fact of God's judgment on our sometimes foolish lives. God created us to bear fruit--the fruit of love, joy, peace, [tolerance], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

The late humorist Lewis Grizzard once said that thinking about God's final judgment over our lives scared the "you-know-what" out of him. One day he received a questionnaire in the mail titled "Heaven: Are You Eligible?"

Grizzard said he took the test and scored "too close to call." (6)

I suspect that some of us might score "too close to call." Thank God for second chances. But a second chance implies that we aren't living our lives at the highest level and we need to do something about it. That's called repentance.

When we consider things who can argue that the owner had the right to cut down the nonbearing tree? Look around you. That is how all of life is ordered. It is part of the law of sowing and reaping. Sow all the wild oats you want to, but eventually there will be a harvest. What kind of harvest can you expect under such circumstances--certainly not a good one?

"Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" The need for a second chance implies that something we've done is wrong, and we need to do something about it.

Life's second chance is what the cross is about.

The man who cared for the vineyard obviously represents Christ. Someone once called Christ "the forgiving side of God." That's not a perfect statement theologically, but for our unsophisticated minds, that is close enough. We read in Hebrews 7:24-25, "But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

Second chances are what the cross is all about. Christ lives with God to make intercession in our behalf. The question is, what will we do in response to the second chance God gives us? Do we continue to make the same foolish mistakes?

We are making a pilgrimage through the Lenten season. On the first Sunday, we dealt with Christ's temptations in the wilderness. We called it a test. And we noted that this is how we should always look at temptations, not as a test designed to defeat us but as an opportunity for us to become stronger.

Second chances are designed to help us learn and grow stronger as we make our pilgrimage through life so that we might bear more and better fruit. I love the way Louisa Tarkington once put it. She wrote:

"I wish there were some wonderful place called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all of our past mistakes and heartaches,
And all of our poor selfish grief,
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
And never be put on again."

Well, there is such a place, this Land of Beginning Again. It's at the foot of the cross. Lent is a reminder to us that we all have missed the mark. But Christ offers us a second chance. Won't you accept his gracious offer and make a new beginning today?