

**“Woodman, Spare that Tree!”**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, March 24, 2019  
The Third Sunday in Lent  
*Luke 13:1-9*

After the recent, devastating tornadoes in Alabama, NBC News ran a story that began like this:

*Sunday was supposed to be a special day.*

*Cora Jones, 52, had been through a lot in recent months: a breast cancer diagnosis in December. A job loss and a move after that. But she had gotten through it thanks to support from members of her family, many of whom lived just several roads away from her in the small community of Beauregard, Alabama.*

*So on Sunday, after church, Jones planned to go to her parents' house and cook them a meal that included her mother's favorite food: sweet potatoes. It was going to be a chance to have a nice evening together as a family.*

*Instead, shortly after they returned home from church, Jones' parents — Mary Louise Jones, 83, and Jimmy Lee Jones, 89 — were killed when devastating tornadoes cut through eastern Alabama on Sunday afternoon. But the losses did not stop there. A total of 10 members of Jones' extended family were killed, including a brother, a cousin, a niece and a second cousin of her mother's.*

*Jones' eyes welled with tears as she spoke of the crushing grief.*

*"I just got so many questions, but you know, you don't question the Lord," Jones said. "Just why, why, you know, why? Why this had to happen like this? To everybody that you know and love? At one time? Why?"*

In our Gospel lesson for this morning there are people who have questions, people who are still shaking their heads over the tragic news they have heard. Some Galileans who went to the Temple to offer their sacrifices have been killed by Pilate's soldiers, so that their blood was mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. You don't question the Lord but these people come to Jesus looking for answers. "Why?" they ask. "You know, why? Why did this have to happen like this?" But he turns the question around. "What do you think? Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered like this?" And although they don't answer the answer is yes.

It was part of their theology: sin equals suffering; therefore anyone who suffered had sinned. You can find an example of this kind of thinking in the book of Job, where Elihu says, "Those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed" (4:8-9). Later in the book Job echoes the same theology: "Does not calamity befall the unrighteous, and disaster the workers of iniquity?" (31:3). In the Gospel of John Jesus' own disciples point to a blind man and ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:2). This is what they believed, that sin equals suffering, so when they ask him about these Galileans they want to know: "What did they *do*?"

"What did they do?" Jesus asks. "Nothing more than anyone else. But unless you repent you will likewise perish." And before they can respond he gives them another example from the evening news. "Those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell, do you think 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." Obviously, then, Jesus

doesn't believe that the suffering of these people was a result of their sin, but he also doesn't let his hearers off the hook. "Unless you repent," he says, "you will all likewise perish."

If this were a Sunday School lesson and not a sermon this is where someone would raise a hand and say, "What does Jesus mean when he says, 'Unless you repent?'" If there is no connection between sin and suffering why should it matter whether we repent or not? And what does he mean when he says, 'You will perish just as they did'? Does he mean that our blood will be mingled with our sacrifices, or that a tower will fall on our heads?" I would take a deep breath and try to answer. I would say that he probably doesn't mean a tower will fall on your head, but that life is fragile, and death could come at any time. For that reason you want to be ready. You want things to be right between you and God. Otherwise, like these, you could die without warning and without time to repent.

Did you notice how those last two sentences made use of the word "you"? How a story about some Galileans became a warning about your own need for repentance? Jesus does this to us sometimes, he doesn't let things stay in the abstract, he makes them personal and pointed. So, don't breathe too easily when he begins to tell this story about a fig tree—it may be you he's talking about.

There was a man who owned a vineyard, and in this vineyard he had planted some fig trees. Now it takes a few years for fig trees to get up to fruit-bearing size, but when this one had he came looking for fruit on it, first one year and then the next and then the next, and in none of those years did he find any fruit. So, he said to the gardener, "Cut it down! Why should it continue to use up the ground?" And this is where the gardener

launches into a chorus of “Woodman, Spare that Tree!” “Leave it alone for one more year,” he begs, “and let me dig around the roots and put on some fertilizer, and if it bears fruit—well and good—but if it doesn’t, well then, you can cut it down.” That seems fair enough, doesn’t it? But if you look a little closer you might see how this request is more than fair.

First of all, fig trees are abundantly fruitful. In the Middle East, where they get both the late rains and the early rains, a fig tree can produce as many as three crops a year. So when the owner of the vineyard says he has come looking for fruit for three years and hasn’t found any he means that this little tree has missed nine opportunities to bear fruit.

Secondly, fig trees thrive on neglect. For this gardener to talk about digging around the roots to stimulate productivity, and for him to talk about putting on fertilizer to encourage the growth of fruit, would have been laughable in that time and place. You didn’t baby a fig tree! You just let it go, let it grow, and the fruit would soon bend down the branches. Not this tree. In all that time it hasn’t put forth the first sign of fruit, but the gardener is determined to give it a chance. He talks about going far above and beyond the normal horticultural practice in order to spare this tree.

Now, if you begin to make comparisons between this tree and the life of the individual; if you think of the owner of the vineyard as God and the gardener as Jesus; then you can begin to see that what God wants from any one of us is fruitfulness. That’s all. But some of us have not borne fruit. We have been content to push our roots down deep into fertile soil, and to wave our branches in the sunshine and to drink deep of the quenching rains, but still we haven’t produced any fruit for the owner. He would be

justified in cutting us down, in putting someone else in our place who would bear fruit. But before he can swing his axe he is stopped by someone who begs him to give us another chance, someone who will work with us and help us produce the fruit we should bear, someone who is willing to go to extraordinary measures to spare us from the axe of the owner. But here is the catch. We have one more year. Which means that although we have been spared for the time being we have not been spared forever, and if we don't repent and start bearing fruit there will come a time when we are cut down and replaced.

I don't think Jesus could be any clearer about his expectations for us. Life is fragile and time is short and when the owner comes with his axe over his shoulder we had better look fruitful.

I remember preaching on this parable to the church I served in Kentucky. When I got finished I said, "This church is like that tree—fruitless." I was young then. I didn't know any better. But you may feel the same way about your church. You may have come looking for fruit on it year after year and finding none. If you strain your ears you might almost be able to hear the owner of the vineyard saying, "Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?" But you might also be able to hear the gardener saying, "No, wait. Let me dig around it and put on some fertilizer and see if this tree can't bear some fruit after all."

It may seem unlikely, but it's not impossible.

Paul Duke, my former pastor, and the man from whom I learned almost everything I know about this parable, said that it reminded him of a prayer one of his deacons used to pray. Whenever it was his turn to pray publicly this deacon would say, "Lord, we thank you for sparing us another day." Paul said he didn't like that prayer it

first. It painted the picture of an angry God, with a thunderbolt in his hand, poised and ready to strike us dead. But after spending some time with this parable he has changed his mind. Here is the owner of the vineyard, ready to cut us down and make room for a tree that will bear some fruit, and here is our Lord, shielding us with his own body, begging for another year. In that second picture we begin to see that we *have* been “spared another day.” But spared for what? Not to use up the ground, but to bear some fruit. And if you haven’t been doing it I think Jesus himself would say,

“It’s time to repent!”

—*Jim Somerville* © 2019

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<sup>i</sup> Gabe Gutierrez and Elizabeth Chuck, [“She Lost 10 Family Members in Alabama Tornadoes. ‘Just why? Why?’”](#) NBC News, March 6, 2019.