

Mother Lynn Finnegan  
Church of the Holy Faith  
Third Sunday in Lent  
Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Cor 10:1-13;  
Ps 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9  
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### Repent: Don't Be Distracted By the Wrong Questions

“At that very time.” These are the first words of our gospel reading today. Whenever a passage begins with “at that very time,” the very first thing that should come to mind is “What time?” It is as if we have been helicopter-dropped into a conversation, and if we are going to make any sense of today’s reading, we need to first give Jesus’ words some context.

Jesus has just finished a meal with the Pharisees and scribes, during which he has taken them to task for their obsession with burdensome rules, their self-centeredness, and their wickedness, and for neglecting justice and the love of God. A crowd of thousands has gathered outside and Jesus, leaving the Pharisee’s home, proceeds to teach. He warns of the Pharisees’ hypocrisy and encourages his disciples to fearlessly witness to his teachings. He counsels against greed, warning “for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions,” and assures them of God’s love, telling them “Do not worry about your life,” and instead “strive for God’s kingdom.” Finally, he warns them to stay alert and remain faithful, for the Son of Man will come at an unexpected hour. In other words, Jesus has just given his disciples and the crowd a road map for discipleship and a life in the fullness of Christ.

Which is why it is somewhat odd that “some present” launch into a non sequitur. Instead of asking about the wisdom words Jesus has just imparted, they want to divert the conversation to the tragic headline of the day, a horrific story of murder and Roman oppression. Because, of course, that’s much easier than self-reflection. You can just hear them, stumbling over each

other's words, eager to gossip about the latest atrocity. "We heard about some Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices! Can you believe that?!" During Jesus' ministry on earth, a prevalent belief was that suffering was brought about by sin. Jesus refutes this. He doesn't ascribe blame to the victims of atrocities, either those who were murdered or those who were victims of faulty tower construction. Instead, he reminds the crowd of our collective vulnerability. He reminds them life is fragile and unpredictable. He redirects them to his wisdom words, his teaching about living a life in the fullness of Christ. He uses their fascination with the sinfulness of others as a call to repent. Not once, but twice, Jesus tells the crowd, "I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Repentance. Many interpret the word "repentance" as being sorry, as asking for forgiveness. In both Hebrew and Greek, however, the word has a richer and deeper meaning. Instead of being simply a state of mind, repentance is also a decision to act: to get off the path and the direction you are heading and move back toward God. Sincere regret for the misdeed is only the first step. Repentance is not just a humble admission of wrongdoing; it is a demonstration of change. In the absolution Father Robin will soon pronounce, he will ask God's mercy for all those with "*hearty* repentance" and "*true* faith." The adjectives are used for a reason. The purpose of repentance is to go through a transformation, which in most cases, is not an overnight deal. Repentance is both sobering and liberating. Without it, Jesus tells us, we will perish. Was Jesus referring to the outward perishing of the body or the inward perishing of the soul? Perhaps both. Either way, a life lived without repentance lacks the fullness of a life in Christ, but a life lived WITH repentance is a life of abundance and freedom.

Repentance also has a corporate element. A society that violates God's purposes through idolatry, injustice, greed, hatred, and exploitation of the marginalized will perish unless repentance is

sought, and transformation takes place. Jesus' use of a fig tree and vineyard parable indicates he is not just talking about individuals. Those hearing his parable would have known the prophets Isaiah and Hosea used the symbols of "vineyard" and "fig tree" to refer to the leaders and people of Israel, as well as God's lament over their faithlessness. Repentance for the Israelites, especially the Pharisees and scribes, meant turning away from false assumptions of righteousness, and living towards Jesus' practice of servanthood, humility, and compassion. It means the same for us today, both individually and corporately.

Don't make the mistake, however, of misinterpreting Jesus' parable, imagining an angry God as the vineyard owner, impatient to chop down and burn the fruitless fig tree. Nothing could be further from the truth. God welcomes the repentant sinner with the eagerness of a father scanning the horizon for the return of his prodigal son, and with the tenacity of the shepherd who leaves the flock of ninety-nine to search for the one who is lost. The parable speaks to God's mercy: the extravagant gardener is not efficient, practical, or logical. Will the fig tree be chopped down in a year? Perhaps not even then.

The parable also, however, speaks to our accountability. Repentance is the gift of discovering God's bounty. While, as our Collect for today reminds us, we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, God gives us every opportunity to bask in his love, to seek forgiveness and truly repent. With God's help, we can turn from the powers of selfishness, hatred, fear, anxiety, and injustice toward the way of truth, love, hope, and justice, one day at a time, one step at a time. As Mother Teresa often said, "not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

Tragedies and disasters can happen at any time, through no fault of our own. Life is short, Jesus reminds us; don't be distracted by the wrong questions when he is patiently trying to teach us the

fullness of life in Christ. Instead ask: How is my relationship with God? How is my community's relationship with God? Do I, do we, love God and respect his created works? Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? Are we taking action to relieve the suffering of others or just pointing our fingers at them? In the poem, "The Summer Day" poet Mary Oliver muses about the nature of prayer, mortality, and, above all, life's purpose. She remarks, "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon," concluding with a challenge, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Today we hear Jesus posing the very same question. What will your answer be? Amen.