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The Otherside of Repentance

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The Otherside of Repentance

This Lenten sermon series names the places in our lives where we question God's presence. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches us about how we find God and that God finds us.

Let me stage for what Jesus says in today's gospel lesson and try to salvage the meaning of a particular word.

The writers of New Testament often used the common Greek word *metanoia*. *Meta* means change and *noia* means heart/mind an expansive sense of how to think. Therefore, it means change your heart and mind.

Centuries ago, this Greek word *metanoia* in English translations became "repent."

Over the years, the church ladled on guilt and fear to corrupt *metanoia* from an invitation to new life and to threaten us with deep regret about a sinful life. For many, to be told "repent" feels as though someone is beating you into submission.

Let's get that out of our mind. I don't think John the Baptist, or Jesus, or any of the disciples berated the crowds into becoming followers. They urged them. Encouraged them. Pushed them. They invited them to change their hearts and minds.

When you hear Jesus say "repent," rather than equate him with a fire-and-brimstone preacher, think instead of Shaheen Hallway. He is the coach of the 15th ranked St. Peter's

basketball team who upset 2nd ranked Kentucky in the opening round of the NCAA. I love March Madness.

Like a good coach, Halloway urged his players to give it their all during practice. You can imagine him yelling, “Faster. Higher. Dig deep. Don’t give up.” That’s how he pushed his players to develop the excellence inherent within each of them while at the same time creating a trust among the team.

When you hear “repent” from Jesus, imagine with the same emphatic voice and the same urgency of an underdog coach competing in the first round.

He does not mince words of the ways we need to repent, pointing out all the ways we fall short. But he does not preach fear, it is dogged love.

In Bible Read Along this week, we all shuddered at his searing demands. Rarely do we linger over these stories from Luke in study or in worship, preferring images of Jesus as the bucolic shepherd who comforts us.

Yet, we cannot worship the grace-filled, resurrected Christ without accepting Jesus’ teachings from the hard road of life.

He demands people be ready to profess their faith in him or else suffer in the next life. You need to be all-in, now. He tells us that we can expect our faith will pit us against family

members. Don't let anyone or anything stand between you and God.

He complains, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" At one point, he shouts that we do not understand "what stress I am under," as if to say, we seem to think life is a practice round when this is the final championship game. We don't get a do-over.

Consider yourself among that crowd of thousands hustling to keep up with him and wondering if you even want to continue.

Please pray with me.

God of our lives, on distant shores war ravages the lives of others and yet we can go about our days as usual. We lay before you our anxiety and look to make sense of such violence and what we can and should do. Silence any voice but your voice. May these words startle us with your truth, so we change our hearts and lives. Amen.

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you **repent**, you will all perish as they did.

⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you **repent**, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then Jesus told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

⁷So 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?’

⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The names of places where profound tragedies occurred always cause us to ask “why.”

The World Trade Center recalls terror. New Orleans and Katrina. Sandy Hook. Mother Emmanuel.

We see daily assaults on civilians by Putin’s army. Cities such as Kyiv and Mariupol might have gone unnoticed and misspelled until a few weeks ago. Now, they are now seared in our minds.

Or it may be some place quite personal. Perhaps the park where the love of your life proposed only to have that person die from cancer. The name of the street name your child was hit by a car, changing everyone's life. The building where you were laid off from the job you loved or the paycheck you needed. All of these places remind us of fearsome events and ask us to question the goodness of God or if God even exists.

In the aftermath of tragedy, we cover their caskets of those who died with our questions.

To mature means to accept that actions produce consequences, and we are responsible for the outcomes. Our rational minds seek to link these tragic events to some cause we can control.

Jesus confronts these questions head-on when asked about tragedies during his time and place. Why would Galileans perish at the temple – a holy site – in such a barbaric way? Jesus responds as though his listeners assumed the victims' sinful nature provoked Pilate's evil. What prompted the structural failure of the tower at Siloam to kill eighteen people? Temples should not just fall from their bases, surely those who died must have some collective sin to warrant their death.

Throughout faith history, questions of God's goodness or neglect have plagued us. The writers of our psalms shake their fist in rage to understand God's motives. We Christians have

failed to find answers that satisfy us. Yet we can't stop asking the questions. Our rational minds crave to connect actions to consequences so we can understand and control.

Since we were created wise enough to learn not to put our finger in an electrical socket and curious enough to discover what compels an apple to fall from the tree to the ground, we naturally look for formulas to eradicate mystery and make sense of our world.

Jesus' followers don't approach him with a blank slate; they come expecting him to verify their deeply held belief that the people suffered because they're sinful. They got what they deserve. That bad things happen to bad people.

In two thousand years, these conclusions still echo but in differing platitudes: "everything happens for a reason," or "God needed another angel," or "God must be punishing them for what lurks in their closets." These are all phrases that slip out of the mouth of the person rendering judgement upon victims.

Rather than answer the question of "why," Jesus treats these as the senseless tragedies they are, just like our Tree of Life or Columbine. These people did not die because they deserved it, or God reigned down terror to capture our attention.

He continues, as long as you are grasping for meaning, why not consider your own sins? Any suffering caused by sin is

senseless. Repent. Change your heart and mind. Get off the path of self-righteousness or any equally destructive way to justify yourself as better or holier than others.

Then he tells a story.

A landowner expects a fig tree to produce fruit. Why waste this place in the orchard on a tree that does nothing? Cut it down. The gardener pleads for some time to work a bit of manure into the soil. Give it another year to see what it can do.

Jesus' parable might seem like a non-sequitur, but this story invites us to explore the questions we ask of sin and tragedy. Let's unpack this a bit.

The landowner blames the tree for failing to produce. It deserves to be cut down.

The gardener sees its potential. The tree could become the place of a dead stump, another site of meaningless loss. Or this tree could become the place that flourishes with abundance. You can imagine Jesus, the gardener, is desperate to save this tree, you and me.

He wants us to live our lives in ways that produce love and forgiveness, focused on gratitude rather than greed. He pleads with the landowner – perhaps us – for a bit more time to learn to live as God intends. Every life is precious, and this gardener came to save.

Lastly, the brief parable tells us more.

The Greek word translated as “manure” refers to some sort of organic matter that you’d work into a plot of ground to produce colorful flowers. Think of peat moss or humus. Humus is closely related to the word “humility.”

Perhaps Jesus prescribes to work a bit of humility into our lives and not get so focused on judging others or justifying ourselves, so we simply live. Then we find ourselves closer to the essence of who God created us to be. Our gardener trusts that the goodness of life and life eternal are possible if we change your hearts and minds about what matters most.

There may be one place in your memory that recalls a senseless tragedy that demanded you make an accounting of your life. Or maybe it is a string of events and a final straw. At some point, you came to realize that the significance of possessions and position fall away. The only thing you really have at the end of life is what you give away.

In that deep valley you find Jesus waiting to claim you. And you decide that is the place to repent and you change your heart and mind.

Then you see there is a place beyond. When we get to the otherside of repentance, the otherside of that place when we finally decide to accept Jesus’ way, we find forgiveness. However difficult or frightening it might have felt to change

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your heart and mind evaporates as you see a new way leading to God. On the otherside of repentance is an abundant life not measured in the size of our barns or the status of our piety. The otherside of repentance is a world of grace we get to live in now.



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