

ST BART's

A Sermon by
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“I Wonder What They Meant?”

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, February 28, 2016
The Third Sunday in Lent—Based on Luke 13: 1-9*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Well, this Gospel is a fire and brimstone sermon in the making, right?

You know those Galileans whose blood Herod mixed with their sacrifices? Not especially bad people. Sorry. We're not off the hook.

Hey, those 18 people in Jerusalem, who were crushed when the tower of Siloam fell on them?

Nope, not evildoers. Not especially, anyway.

Just plain folks, you could say.

And unless you repent—well, it could happen to you. In fact, strike the “could.” *It will happen to you.* Because we're all going to die, one day.

Feeling good yet?

Didn't think so.

This is one of the famous “hard sayings” of Jesus. It's hard because it's flinty, tough-minded, unpleasant. It's hard because it's hard to bear. It's hard because we don't recognize the Jesus we love in this story.

This sounds like John the Baptist in one of his less friendly moods. It sounds very punitive. Very judge-y. Where's that “friend of sinners” when we need him?

But then Jesus moves into the parable, so relief is at hand, we think. So the fig tree is, once again, barren. That's three years in a row! And the owner tells the gardener to cut it down. It's a waste of soil.

But the Gardener intercedes for the tree—“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Well, that's a relief. Stay of execution. I was feeling nervous there—hey wait a second. The Gardener is only asking for one last chance. One last chance for the tree to show its value, to become a good useful tree. And if not—cut it down.

Jesus' parable and response to the bad news about his fellow Galileans is to call his listeners to repent.

Now think about that for a second. Jesus has just been told about an atrocity—the Galileans weren't just killed; their blood was used to profane the altar, making their religious sacrifices a kind of human sacrifice—the very kind of sacrifice the Hebrew Scriptures condemn the worship of Moloch and the Baals for. It was an atrocity in a holy place.

The closest modern parallel I can think of is the shooting in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church last June, in Charleston, South Carolina.

And in the wake of this atrocity, Jesus calls his listeners—friends and maybe even family members of the victims—to repent.

I had to wrestle with this Gospel; I admit it. And when something bubbled up from my subconscious, it was a question from an old Leonard Cohen song, of all things. Here's the question:

When they said,

Repent.

Repent.

Repent.

I wonder what they meant?

But what does repentance mean? The term in the Gospel is *metanoia*, which translates as “to think differently after,” or “to change one’s mind.”

That doesn’t get us very far, though. Does the Gospel reading help us any more? We don’t know how Jesus’ listeners reacted. We don’t know much about the murdered Galileans, cut down in a holy place, their deaths used to pollute something sacred.

But we have a glimpse into what Jesus may mean here from the reaction of the worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and their families: They forgave the young man, twisted with hate, whom they had welcomed into their spiritual home, and who betrayed their welcome, killing nine of their brothers and sisters.

The church community forgave him anyway.

What does repentance look like?

A lot like forgiveness, if you look closely.

Both require us to make the effort to see the people who have hurt us not just through the lens of the pain they’ve inflicted on us or those we love. When we do that, we’re repenting, in a very real way. We’re re-thinking. Going past the anger, to see the situation in the round. Forgiveness is the mirror image of repentance—they both require us to look beyond ourselves.

But let’s not complicate it.

Repentance is just a fancy word for changing your mind.

Let me give you an example—the one that caught my attention.

I once knew a woman who had a terminal diagnosis. Stage 4 cancer. She could have drowned in self-pity, or just let other people look after her. Instead, she took a long hard look at her life. And she realized that she’d hurt a lot of the people she loved. She’d been tough, critical, sometimes even cruel. So she got busy. She reached out to the people she had hurt, the friends she’d driven away, the children she’d made afraid of her.

She apologized. But even more, she made amends. She did her best to help each of the people she’d harmed to start healing from the damage she’d done. She repaired the damaged relationships in her life, to the best of her ability. And in doing so, she discovered a happiness that eluded her in health. Repentance isn’t easy. It takes up 4 of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. First, sober alcoholics make a searching and fearless moral inventory of themselves—that’s the Fourth Step.

Then—and here’s the hard bit—then, comes admitting to God, to oneself, and to another human being the exact nature of the wrongs of the past. That’s the Fifth Step.

By the way, the shocking part of the Fifth Step is that all the secrets that seem so unspeakable—they’re always old news to a sponsor, or, if you try this in the sacrament of reconciliation, to the confessor. The harder it is to admit, generally, the more used to it a confessor, a sponsor or a therapist is.

Then after coming to terms with the past, and laying it all before God, comes the next hurdle. The Eighth Step requires alcoholics to make a list of all persons they’ve harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all. Not to actually make the amends yet—just to become willing.

The actual amends come in the Ninth Step. That's making direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. So, when possible, without causing more damage to them or someone else, try to put right what went wrong—do so. When it can't be done, pray for the person who has been harmed, and do something concrete, maybe help someone in a similar situation. The Ninth Step can be humiliating, especially when those who have been harmed aren't ready to forgive. But at the end of it, the burdens of the past are gone. If the relationship that was injured is still dead, at least there's been an effort at closure and reconciliation. To end it well.

Now why did I take you through that?

Because it's a blueprint—one of several—for repentance without self-hatred. Repentance isn't about self-loathing; it's about coming to terms with ourselves, strengths and weaknesses, and recognizing the shadow side of ourselves—and forgiving him or her. And then moving on.

And we all need to do it, because we're none of us perfect. Every one of us can reach out today to someone we love but haven't kept up with, or to repair a broken tie. Repentance means fixing little things as well as big; we don't have to be the notorious sinner St. Augustine was, or St. Paul, who persecuted the Early Church, in order to correct the things that lie on our hearts.

Oh, no fire and brimstone yet. Well, we still have the threat of death, or of being cut down like the fig tree if it doesn't turn it around. So God is still pretty scary, right?

Oh, come on. Of course we're all going to die. Everyone is mortal, so we're all going to die. That's the very point Jesus is making. Bad things happen to good people. It doesn't matter that those Galileans weren't terrible sinners; they died anyway. Same thing with the people crushed in the tower collapse.

Jesus is rejecting a type of thinking called theodicy—the effort to get God off the hook for the problem of suffering. He's rejecting the Psalmist's contention that the good will live in and inherit the land, while the wicked will be swept away. He's pointing out that life and death are mysteries, and the story doesn't end in a satisfying way. If you treat it as a story, that is.

But it's not a story. The end isn't going to be aesthetically satisfying, with sweeping theme music. It's just as likely to be a sudden surprise.

What Jesus is saying is that we none of us knows how much time we have. Every day is a chance to take the steps toward reconciliation and live in wholeness with those we love. And we don't know how many of those chances we get.

So repent. Repent. Repent.

It just means changing your mind.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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