

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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Luke 13: 1 - 9

CHANGING THE WAY WE PAY ATTENTION

Do we hear the hope offered in the story in the scripture we read? There is hope for the fig tree. Hope for change to occur and for the production of fruit! Surely the fig tree represents the journey of faith for every disciple.

It's easy for us to believe that we can just show up and that our journey will have meaning. Too much of what the world sees in the Church is little more than people who look like Christians. You know: we read our Bibles, we attend church, and we do all the "churchy" things, but then in our interactions with others, we fall short of sharing the love of Christ.

Part of what Luke is telling us is that without the fruit of the spirit—remember in Galatians: 5, the fruit that we are to enjoy is love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and goodness, faithfulness and gentleness, and self control—without all these being produced in community, faith easily becomes a journey without a destination.

The owner in the story Jesus tells and the gardener are both intent in seeing one result. They want the same thing. They want this fig tree to produce some figs. They want to see the fruit of their labors. And so the gardener offers a plan. He's going to remove all the barriers to fig production. Not enough rich soil—"We'll enrich it," he says. I'm sure along the way if there is too much competition from surrounding plants, more room will be made for that fig tree. There'll be root development and more water added. Every possible change will be made to give this tree the chance it needs, the environment it requires to produce.

For Luke that environment is the Christian life where we understand the connection between repentance and forgiveness. Wesley White is a Christian author who writes about this passage. He describes what's happening in this parable as paying attention to the fig tree or paying attention to the journey in a different way. He says if we look at life's experiences only hoping to find what's at fault or someone to blame, then we will see life as nothing more than that: a blame game. And since we're all human, since we're all prone to miss the mark, he says we end up in a cycle of continually repeating sin; and then he adds in a not-so-original fashion, cautioning us if we keep looking for some place to place the fault, we will be come that very sin ourselves.

So as we read this story about repentance, can we remember how Jesus talked about the connection—how he understood the essential nature of repentance? He said early on in Luke that John the Baptist came and warned the crowds to repent and to bear fruit worthy of repentance; to stop saying "We are Abraham's children; therefore, we have no

need of anything else.” Later in the fifth chapter, Jesus says, “I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” In the fifteenth chapter Jesus says, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”

And finally, words from which we draw the text from the Apostles’ Creed: in the latter chapters of Luke it says “Christ suffered and on the third rose from the dead so repentance and forgiveness can be preached to all the nations.”

If we are guilty of anything, especially in the reformed church, we are so enamored and captivated and in love with grace that we forget that forgiveness requires repentance. If the only time we contemplate sin is during a worship service every week, and every year it’s only during Lent that we remember to be penitent, then our lives are noticeably lacking in that fruit that comes from forgiveness that begins with repentance. In these two stories in the 13th chapter of Luke, Jesus sets the record straight.

Do you think some people suffer because they are worse sinners? Do you think tragedy happens in our lives because some are worse than others? No, Jesus declares. No. But if you think you can live without repentance, you will end up just as those who have been visited by tragic circumstances.

Clearly, these two stories about Galileans and people who die when a part of the world of Jerusalem collapses are Jesus calling us to pay attention in a different way. Stop finding a place to point your finger. Begin to live like those who are prepared to overcome tragic circumstances and pain in this life. Begin to live, Jesus says, as if there is a greater purpose than just what we can milk or pull from this life—what security or safety we can garner or secure for ourselves. Begin to live as if you are indeed victorious over your circumstances. I think, as we prepare for this meal—and this is a meal for everyone—there is no fence around the communion table in the church of Christ because the Lord is our host. I believe in this meal that it is good for us to be reminded of what we need today, so let us go to God once again in prayer.

Lord, we are a lot like fruit trees. And in this season we need to be pruned. So take away the dead branches in our lives so that we can be ready to bear good fruit. Give us new leaves, fresh buds, and blossoms. Give us your spirit, Lord, for you are chief physician and the master gardener, and you make no mistakes in your pruning. And so, individually and corporately, we yield to your powers. Help us change the way we pay attention to your presence in our lives. In the name of our Savior, Amen.