



From Here to Eternity - Part 4

A Sermon by Rev. Rich Brasher

Cleora United Methodist Church

March 7, 2010

Open your Bibles to Luke 13:1-9

This morning we are continuing our Lenten Message Series entitled *From Here to Eternity*. This is actually the fourth part of the series, but you can read the other three, beginning with part one on Ash Wednesday, by clicking on the link provided on our website, at www.cleoraumc.org.

Next Sunday will be UMW Sunday, and our ladies will be providing the message as well as leading us in worship. The Sunday after that (the 21st of March), I will be on vacation, so we'll take a little 2-week break and get back to our series on the 28th of March (Palm Sunday) with the 5th and final part (I'll be combining part 5 and part 6 into one message).

Some things we've discovered as we've gone through this series are that we are called to a season of repentance in order to ready ourselves for Christ's passion and resurrection. We've taken on Psalm 51: 10-13 as a daily prayer. We've recalled the grace we received at our Baptism, and we've been carrying a small pebble in our pockets as a reminder. We've learned that the best way to deal with temptation is to know the Word of God well enough that we can draw on it when needed, and to maintain focus on God's will for our lives. And we've discovered that God's desire is to protect us the way a mother hen would gather her chicks under her wings, but that all too often, in our zeal to be first, we fail to give Him His place in our lives.

Today, we add another chapter to the story... Luke 13 beginning in the first verse:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them-do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

"'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" (NIV)

On one level this is a pastoral moment, calling forth a response from Jesus addressed to the deepest thoughts and aches of the human heart. Whenever something goes slightly wrong, have you ever heard someone say, "You just haven't been living right?" I never heard it said seriously at a time when someone was really hurting. However, I have heard the principle behind the saying articulated when things fall apart for someone, when the burden of the heat of the day becomes unbearable, when things seem to go from bad to worse, when someone cries out, "Why?," "Why me?" In the painful struggle of trying to make sense of something senseless, the age-old logic of, "You just haven't been living right," sneaks into our consciousnesses.

In the days following the events that we've come to know as "911," there was an intense desire to understand "why." Not so much, "why did they do that," (that part was obvious) but

rather, “why would a loving God allow such a thing to happen for any reason?” Unfortunately, a good many people, in a weak attempt to make sense of it all, theorized that as a nation we must “just not be living right” and that this even must have been God’s punishment. That is terrible theology, and my Bible tells me of a different kind of God than that. And today’s scripture definitely speaks to that and it does so in Jesus’ own words.

The problem is that common sense suggests that if there is a demonstrable effect, there must be an explainable cause. The desire to comfort by explanation is part of who we are as human beings. It comes with the territory. In varying ways the friends of Job reflect that.

You know the story of Job. Job’s faith was being tested, and in the process, he suffered numerous tragedies. One of his friends said, “*As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it*” (Job 4:8 NIV). And another said, “*...if you will look to God and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your rightful place*” (Job 8:5-6 NIV). It could be worse, another said with these words: “*Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves*” (Job 11:6 RSV).

So when Jesus spoke to those who came to Him telling of a terrible human tragedy, He dealt directly, emphatically, and bluntly with this almost natural human tendency. “*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!*” (Luke 13:2-3 NIV).

Frankly, if God was in the business of handing out judgment and curses in relation to our sins, there probably wouldn’t be anyone left on the planet. In this text, Jesus says no to simplistic answers to deep and complex questions; no to attempts to solve deep troubles with quick fixes, and no to

shallow theological thinking. Clearly, Jesus is responding to a pastoral human ache.

But there is also a missional moment and message here. After Jesus says no, He goes on to speak of the responsibilities of those who hear His words. “*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*” (Luke 13:2-3 NIV). And after applying this understanding to another tragic situation, Jesus tells a parable about a gardener determined to tend a fruitless fig tree because he is open to a future possibility that he does not control or manage.

Facing the reality of mystery and the limits of what we can know is not an excuse to merely stand still and look sad, as Luke describes some of the disciples, paralyzed at the time of the death of Jesus. (Luke 24:17). Jesus is on a mission. Those who would follow in His way in the power of His Spirit, are on that same mission. Much is unknown. Many questions will remain unanswered. In the end, the future belongs to God, but we share in the mission of unfolding the future. That is clearly where our responsibility lies.

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus said of himself, “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” (Luke 4:18-19 NIV). This is Jesus’ mission statement and, as Christians, it is also our own mission statement.

Jesus tells the story of the fig tree. It is as though Jesus is saying, “...and it’s not enough to just avoid sin, but you also need to be actively involved, here.”

You see, the man who owned the tree wanted to cut it down, because it wasn't bearing fruit. But the one who cared for the tree was much more patient. He could see that there was possibility in the tree - that there was yet hope.

God, through Jesus Christ, is hopeful for us as well. When we fail to bear fruit for Him, He is willing to nurture and fertilize us. He sees possibility in each one of us, and He holds out hope for each of us to bear fruit - to follow Him in His mission - to love as He loves - to forgive as He forgives - and to become obedient to God. Teaching and leading us to bear fruit for the kingdom is yet another part of the way in which God came to earth in human form in order to lead us *from here to eternity* - an eternity with Him in glory.

Now, I know that there is no one in this room who has born absolutely no fruit at all. But I'm equally sure that there is also no one in this room (including myself) who has born as much fruit as we've had opportunity to bear.

For many of us, the Farmer has been patient for a very long time, checking our branches to see whether we have born any fruit.

And for any one of us, just like the fig tree, there just may be, but one more year.

Let us pray...