

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Lent 3

March 20, 2022

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Us, not them

At that time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²He answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? ³I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse sinners than all the people living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”

⁶He told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?’ ⁸But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. ⁹If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.’”

—Luke 13:1-9

How do you feel when you see tragedy strike someone? When we see the devastation and loss of human life in Ukraine, we feel angry and appalled, we feel tremendous empathy for the victims of this horrible invasion, but we also feel helpless and sad. But we don't feel that way with every tragedy. We might experience different emotions when we react to the evening news. The news reports that a pedestrian was killed crossing a busy street at night when he was hit by a car driven by a driver who was traveling the speed limit and was not impaired and remained on the scene to speak with the police. In another story the news reports that the driver of a speeding vehicle who had been drinking lost control and perished when she slammed into a wall. In those cases we feel differently, don't we? Certainly we might lament the loss of life all the same, and we might empathize with the friends and family who lost a loved one, but there's also this side of us that says, “That's what you get for walking across a busy road in the dark,” or “It's better that the drunk driver hit a wall and lost her life before she could hit someone else and take their life.” There is a Mexican proverb that says, “*Él que anda mal acaba mal*” (“The one who walks in a bad way ends up in a bad place”). There might be a part of us that feels, “They got what they deserved.”

“They got what they deserved.” That was the sentiment behind the comments to Jesus in today's Gospel. *Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.* We don't know for certain exactly what event this refers to, but we may have a pretty good idea. We know Pontius Pilate very well from his trial of Jesus written for us in the Gospels; Pontius Pilate's name made it into our Christian creeds, as we confess that Jesus was “crucified under Pontius Pilate.” Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, and the Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Pilate was not always sensitive to the religious beliefs of his subjects. He narrowly avoided a popular uprising when he brought the image and insignia of Caesar into Jerusalem to be displayed prominently in the temple area, and the people rebelled so vehemently that Pilate was forced to choose between putting down the uprising by force or withdrawing Caesar's image; in that case he wisely chose to withdraw the offending images. But the incident that was brought to Jesus' attention may have been the result of Pilate's desire to build an aqueduct into Jerusalem using sacred money from the temple treasury. Josephus tells us that tens of thousands of people rose up in protest, but Pilate had his troops strategically planted in the crowd, and on his signal the soldiers started cutting people down. These may have been the Galileans “whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices.”

Another event that we know nothing further about but was well known to the people of his day, Jesus refers to the tower of Siloam that collapsed and took the lives of 18 people—another tragedy with victims. With both of these events, the conclusion of many was the same: The people died; therefore they were getting what they deserved. Some sin must have led to this consequence for them. But Jesus was not willing to let these incidents just be about “them.” In both cases Jesus' assessment is the same: *Unless you repent, you too will all perish.* His words are not about them. They are spoken to us, not them.

It's easy to think that others' sins are worse than our own. It's easy for us to assign levels of guilt for certain behaviors, to think that murder incurs more guilt than gossip, that rage calls for greater justice than lust, or that aggression warrants more punishment than laziness and apathy. God doesn't see it that way. Every sin is a violation of the holy will of God. Every sin incurs God's just wages of death. Every sin that causes us to fall short of the perfection and holiness that God requires for us to be in his presence—every sin will damn us. That doesn't mean we should flippantly say, “All sins are the same.” That's a simplistic and inaccurate description of sin. Sins

differ in their scope, in their consequences, in their visibility, in their brutality, and on and on. But every sin brings God's wrath, and every sin brings death. My sins and your sins may look on the outside very different from Pontius Pilate's sins or Vladimir Putin's sins, but they lead to the same consequence, which is death. Pontius Pilate died; he himself suffered the same consequence as those whom he had put to death. Vladimir Putin will die one day, and he will answer to God for his sins and his crimes, and God will dispense justice. But I will also die one day, and so will you. And we will answer to God for our sins and our crimes. There is no favoritism. The same physical death awaits all of us because we have sinned, and because of our sins each of us must return to the dust from which we were taken.

Your sins and my sins may not be nearly as obvious and as violent as the sins of flagrant offenders. Maybe you're just a typical, red-blooded American in pursuit of the American dream, and you're in love with your car and your house and your comfortable lifestyle, and you hold onto your money tightly, and it's not readily obvious that you're selfish and materialistic—because those sins don't come out on the evening news. But it's still idolatry. It's still pushing the true God to the side and replacing him with another "first love." Maybe you're just trying to save some money on your taxes when you do an all-cash, under-the-table deal, and your shady business dealings don't warrant congressional hearings. But it's still fraud all the same. Maybe you've done a very clever job of concealing your sins, so they're not obvious and known to others. Maybe nobody knows what you look at on your computer when nobody's watching over your shoulder. Maybe you've learned to chew gum, so that nobody smells the liquor that's always on your breath. Maybe you've learned to conceal your impatience and simmering anger under a façade of congeniality. Maybe you've learned to mask your rage when you're in public, so that it only comes out when you take it out on those closest to you. Maybe your heart is consumed by anxiety and worry and lack of trust in God, but that lack of faith doesn't make the headlines.

I use the pronoun "you" because Jesus used the word, but I have to include myself in every example of sin. I am no better. All of us sin. All of us stumble and fall into temptation. But what happens when there is no struggle against sin? What happens when we are comfortable with our wicked attitudes or sinful lifestyle, when we are resolved to continue in our sinfulness in spite of all admonition to the contrary? That's not repentance. That's not Christian faith. And Scripture is abundantly clear: "Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21).

So here's the lesson from Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel today: We can call evil evil—and we must! We can condemn sinful behavior and attitudes as wicked—and we must! But we cannot climb onto our high horse and point the finger down at others, as if we are righteous and they are not. Jesus' words are very direct and pointed to us, not to them: "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." Jesus is speaking those words to me and to you.

Along with Jesus' word of warning comes a beautiful invitation: Repent and believe the good news! What does it mean to repent? It means to confess our sin and turn away from it. It means to turn from sin and turn to Jesus. While lingering and languishing in sin might seem so appealing to our sinful nature, the reality is that it leads to eternal death. Jesus calls us to something better. He calls us out of the shadows, out of the darkness, out of shame, away from guilt and condemnation to a new life with him. No more deception, no more hiding, no more pretending, just honest transparency: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). He gives us forgiveness and freedom. With Jesus there is no more perishing in death and damnation; there is forgiveness for our sins and the gift of eternal life.

Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree that wasn't producing any fruit, a tree that was ready to be cut down and used for firewood. But the servant who cared for the tree bought it some time. "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." That parable tells the story of our time of grace. Isn't it comforting to see God's patience and grace working with us? He feeds and nourishes you with his Word of forgiveness. He holds before our eyes the cross of Jesus and puts his immense love for us on display, as we see our Savior suffering and dying for our sins. God's Spirit calls us again and again to turn away from sin that leads to destruction and flee to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness. To each of us is given a time of grace for repentance and amendment of our sinful life. We're never going to eradicate sin in our lives, but we are going to turn away from it. We are going to reinvigorate our struggle against sin, resolve to fight against everything that is evil, and strive by God's grace and power to show our love for Jesus in everything we do. We are going to take up the shield of faith to fight against temptation, to ask God for victory in the struggle against sin. And most importantly, when we stumble and fall into sin, we rest in Jesus. With penitent hearts we rest in his grace, confident in his love.

When the Spirit produces the fruits of repentance in our hearts and lives, we see and experience some beautiful things as the Spirit works in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). We see a powerful example in our Growing to Serve building campaign. As we prepare for Celebration Sunday next week, and as we get ever closer to our million-dollar campaign goal, just pause for a moment and reflect on how amazing that is. Why would Christians give so generously, so selflessly to support building a new ministry center? We know that it's *not* so that they can buy their way into heaven. We know that it's *not* because people think God is going to love them more. No, those gifts are fruits of repentance and faith. They are a joyful response of gratitude to God for his mercy to us. They are a humble way to say "Thank you!" to our Savior, who has given us everything, especially a penitent, believing heart, a new life with him, and the privilege of being a child of God. Amen.