

SERMON: A Sinful Competition

TEXT: Luke 13:1-9

I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door, not by the beauty of it all, by the lights or its décor. But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp – the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics, the trash. There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice. Next to him was my old neighbor, who never said anything nice. Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in hell, was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well. I nudged the angel, "What's the deal? I would love to hear your take. How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake. And why's everyone so quiet, so somber? Give me a clue." "Hush, child," said he, "they're all in shock. No one thought they'd see you." (Author Unknown)

Oh, yes. We all have our ideas about who we think we'll see in heaven. We especially want to be reunited with precious loved ones who have gone before us. On the other hand, we may also have very strong opinions about who better not be there when we arrive! Maybe your list includes people who have wronged you or hurt you deeply and never apologized or showed any remorse. Of course, everyone I know has Adolf Hitler in their mind as someone who would never even make it to the stairway of heaven, much less through the pearly gates.

Awhile back, someone shared with me an article from the Wall Street Journal, with the headline, *Do We Still Need to Believe in Hell?* The writer, Scott Bruce, began by reporting, “In March 2018, Pope Francis allegedly denied the existence of Hell and the endless suffering of the damned in a private talk” with a friend. Apparently, this is not the first instance of a Pope or the Roman Catholic Church as a whole softening on the idea of eternal damnation. Bruce, who is a professor of history, goes on to explain that the concept of Hell was thought of at least a thousand years before it became a cornerstone of Christian doctrine. “[And] Hell remains a powerful concept in the early 21st century. According to a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center, more than 50 percent of American adults still believe in the existence of a place *where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished*. Unsurprisingly, very few of them believe that they themselves will end up there when they die.” (Scott G. Bruce, *Do We Still Need to Believe in Hell?* The Wall Street Journal, September 15-16, 2018)

In today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus who, while teaching the crowds, heard them tell about a mass murder in which Pontius Pilate “mingled the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices.” This has been referred to by scholars as “the slaughter of the Galileans,” while they were on a pilgrimage to offer their sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. It is suggested that Pilate may

have been suspicious that their intent was not only to worship, but also to rebel against the Romans. Being a brutal and unjust ruler, Pilate had them killed. In response, Jesus questioned the crowds, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Then Jesus referred to a recent natural disaster: “Or 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

As we know, people living in the time of Jesus believed that suffering was a punishment for sin. If you fell ill or lost a child or came to an untimely death, you must have done something to deserve such a fate.

Over 2,000 years later, most of us don't believe that God punishes us for our sins. We will admit that we are sinners, but we are confident that we are forgiven and redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. We proclaim that Jesus “bore our sins in his body on the cross,” taking the punishment that we deserve.

At the same time, however, we play this game and we make our lists of those who are *worse sinners* than we are. Like the survey I mentioned earlier, half of Americans still believe in hell, but we all think it's a place reserved for someone else, worse sinners than we are. The mass murderers, for instance; those who abuse innocent children; perhaps even those who are exceptionally greedy without remorse. And we believe we are justified in our condemnation: "There's a special place in hell for them."

The book we are studying in Sunday School on forgiveness also speaks to this issue. "We get ourselves in trouble when we begin measuring the relative *weight* of human sins. To whatever extent other people's sins seem obviously greater than our own, we may let ourselves more easily off the hook. We feel justified in regarding with shock and horror the *big sins* of others, effectively keeping eyes off our own sins and allowing us to feel a certain measure of self-righteousness." (Marjorie J. Thompson, *Forgiveness; A Lenten Study*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014)

When we measure our sins against others, we engage in A SINFUL COMPETITION. Instead of working on being the best person I can be, I'll just find someone who's worse than me. I'll see if I can divert the attention off me and

my shortcomings by pointing at that guy over there. But as the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The point that Jesus is trying to make is that we ought to mind our own business. If we admit that we are sinners, then our energy should be focused on repenting of our own sin, not looking around to find others who are worse. As one scholar pointed out, “When it comes to judging sin, it is best to look for the log in your own eye before searching for the speck in your neighbor’s – or maybe even your enemy’s.” (Rodney Clapp, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, p. 96)

Were the Galileans who died worse sinners who got what they deserved? Were those crushed by the collapse of the tower of Siloam worse offenders? “No,” Jesus said. “But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

“Unless you repent.” Those three words make an apt segue into Jesus’ parable of the fig tree. “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So 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?* [The gardener] replied, *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.”

It's not a perfect metaphor. The fig tree isn't really *sinful* in any way. It is simply not producing. The parallel I would make is that when we are focusing on the sins of others, we are not producing any good works or fruit of our own. The good news, however, is that we have a gardener who wants to give us another chance.

As we repent, as we allow Jesus and the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, we can be transformed. When we focus on living faithfully, we can blossom and flourish and produce fruit that will feed and nourish others with the love and mercy of Christ.

May we repent, return to the Lord, and bless the Lord as long as we live... to the glory of God! AMEN.