

The 3rd Sunday of Lent: Holy Trinity Church: March 20, 2022

Luke 13: 1-9 *The Greatest Sin*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

Last Sunday, I asked, who lives in you? Let me ask you another important question: What is the worst sin any of us can commit as a follower of Christ? Of course, I'm if we are not going to murder someone, or commit adultery, or rob a bank. What then is the worst thing we can do as a follower of Jesus Christ? Think about that for a moment.

Today, Jesus told us a parable: "A man had a fig tree growing 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.'" Now let me ask you the question again in light of this parable.

As a follower of Jesus Christ what is the worst sin you can commit? The answer is: the worst sin you can commit is to do nothing. Doing nothing, or in this case, not bearing fruit, is the quickest way to disqualify you from the Kingdom of God. Two men are talking about their friendship. One of them said, “We’ve been friends for 25 years and there is nothing we wouldn’t do for each other.” And the other man said, “And that’s what we’ve been doing for one another for 25 years. Absolutely nothing.” As a follower of Jesus that’s the worst thing you can do in the light of the parable of the fig tree? Nothing.

In our Gospel from Luke 16, there is another of Jesus’ memorable stories. It was about a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury. At his gate lay a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side, in heaven. The rich man also died. But he didn’t go to heaven. Instead he found himself in Hades, where he was in torment. He looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So, he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’”

Why did the rich man end up in such a state? There is no evidence that he ever did anything wrong except for one. He did nothing. There was a poor man lying literally at his gate, and he did nothing to help. So often in Jesus' teaching this is the sin that condemns people not something desperately foul that they did, but something noble and good that they neglected to do. The same scenario played out with the servant who was given two bags of gold and earned two bags of gold and more. The master was intensely pleased. But then the man who had received one bag of gold came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So, I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you." What was his master's reaction? Not so good. "You wicked, lazy servant!" he said. "So, you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. "So, take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags of gold," said the master, "... and throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:14-30). It's easy to feel sorry for this poor guy. After all, he was probably a nice guy. But being a nice guy or a nice lady isn't nearly as important as making your life count for

something. And how do you make your life count? By using what you have for God's glory and making the world a better place. We could keep going on with this theme and beyond.

I can see that some of you are worried I'm going to do just that.] For example, remember the story of the rich young ruler who turned back rather than giving up his wealth and following Jesus. By his own admission he had kept all the commandments from his youth up. But when the opportunity came for him to make his life count, he turned back. He was a good man, but, pardon the slang, he was good for nothing.

My sisters and brothers, I believe it is the most consistent theme in Jesus' teachings. Yes, there are sins of the flesh. Yes, there are sins that fill our lives with guilt and shame. But the sin of which most of us is guilty, the sin that threatens to keep us out of the kingdom of God, IS THE SIN OF OMISSION.

It is the sin of doing nothing when we have the opportunity for doing something productive, something that will help someone in need, something that will glorify God. I have titled this sermon "The Greatest Sin." St. Paul knew that this is what the Great Commandment is all about. You can't love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself and sit idly by when a fellow human being, regardless of who they may be, needs help.

So, Jesus told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. Jesus is talking about us, if we are not bearing fruit. So, what kind of fruit do we need? St. Paul tells us in Galatians 5. These 10 fruits of the Spirit are the following: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That’s a good beginning. But caring for the down-and-out tops the list, according to Jesus’ teachings. Caring for those who are sick, those who are troubled, those who are lonely, those who are in trouble.

Bearing fruit is something that all of us can do. We don’t have to have a university degree. You don’t have to be ordained. We don’t have to be gifted in terms of leadership or technical abilities or gifted as speakers. All we need is Christ’s heart giving us sensitivity to the needs of others and the willingness to serve.

When Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was doing research on her famous book on death and dying, she came across the story of an African-American woman, a member of a certain hospital’s maintenance crew. The woman spent her day cleaning floors, emptying wastebaskets, tidying up. The hospital staff noticed that each time she finished cleaning the room of a dying patient, that person was invariably more content, happier, and at peace. Dr. Kubler-Ross

interviewed her to find out why. The woman said that she had known a lot of fear and tragedy in her life, as well as good times when others helped her know of God's love. She'd been up, and she'd been down the mountain. The worst time was when her three-year-old son was ill with pneumonia. She brought him to the public health clinic and he died in her arms while she waited her turn.

All of this could have embittered her, but it gave her a heart for helping others who were in distress, like she had been at that time in life. She said to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, "You see, doctor, the dying patients are just like old acquaintances to me, and I'm not afraid to touch them, to talk with them, or to offer them hope." Dr. Kubler-Ross said that consequently they promoted this woman at the hospital. She was no longer a member of the house keeping crew. Her title became, "Special Counselor to the Dying." This woman with few resources at her disposal made her life count. Of course, if you have been blessed with great resources or great leadership ability, or extraordinary talent, you have greater opportunities for doing good than this woman did.

I am a big fan of the Irish rock and roll singer Bono of the band, U-2. Since 1985 Bono and his wife Ali have been working for underprivileged people around the world, especially in Africa. Bono recalls an incident that really

affected his thinking about his responsibility to the world. In 1985, he and Ali spent one month living in Ethiopia near a feeding station. A man walked up to Bono and thrust his baby son into Bono's arms, saying, "You take my son. He'll live if you take him." Bono thought to himself, how deep could a country's suffering be that a father would give up his son to a stranger if it might save his son's life? At this point, Bono and Ali realized that they could not go back to the complacency in which they had once lived. Bono understood that to be confronted with such misery required that he do something. I don't know how many people worldwide that Bono has helped since that awakening. I'm sure it's in the thousands, perhaps the millions. You and I don't have the kinds of opportunity that Bono has, but even if we help only one person, according to Christ, it will not go unrewarded.

But notice something quite interesting in this story of the fig tree. I realize that a sermon like this can be quite guilt-inducing if you take it seriously. I, myself, experience that guilt. But notice there is a note of grace in this story. It is the caretaker that replies, "Sir, 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's interesting, don't you think? The caretaker asks the master for one more year before he cuts it down. This act introduces a note of grace into the story.

This is the challenge for the 3rd Sunday of Lent. In the insurance industry, there is what is known as a “grace period.” A grace period is defined as the additional period a lender or an insurance policy issuer provides for a borrower to make passed due payment on a debt without penalty. The insurance man constantly had to deal with people seeking to maintain their policies in what they referred to as the policy’s grace period. I believe that there are a number of Christians living in their spiritual grace period. And, I believe that is probably true of most of us. We can look over our lives and see plenty of opportunities we have had to do the right thing, the loving thing for others, things that would have brought God glory. Fortunately, Jesus Christ is not interested in cutting us down like a barren fig tree. What Jesus wants is for us to examine our hearts and ask ourselves during our grace period if we are living our best life? Or are we just taking up room on this planet? Christ used his grace period to redeem us from sin and death. Are we using our grace period to reach out to others? May God help us so to do. AMEN!