

March 7, 2010 Third Sunday in Lent Communion Sunday

Isaiah 55: 1-9, Luke 13: 1-9

One More Chance

When I was teaching kids with special needs, I often heard myself saying, "Okay, you have one more chance."

Sometimes it was a warning that they had one more chance to straighten up and behave themselves. Many times it seemed like they were trapped in a downward spiral of poor choices and rule-breaking, and if I just reminded them of the consequences "one more time," they would finally make a better choice.

But other times it wasn't a warning but rather an invitation to show me that they really had learned what I was trying to teach them! I gave them one more chance to answer the question or do what it was I wanted them to do.

I learned to say “one more chance” before I gave up for a while----one more chance to get it right, one more chance to stop getting it wrong. One more chance to try their best and do something they had never done before.

In our reading from the Gospel according to Luke this morning, Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree and a gardener who convinced his boss to give the tree one more chance.

The fig tree had not produced any fruit for three years and the owner was disgusted with it. “Why should it be wasting the soil? Why should it take up space in the garden if it’s not going to produce figs?”

A fig tree's purpose, after all, is to produce figs. If it's not fulfilling its purpose, well, then, it's finished. It's out of here. Cut it down, throw it into the fire.

And there is a time when that needs to happen, just like there were times with my students when I had to stop trying to teach something because I was wasting my time and frustrating both of us. There was just no way that child was going to learn that particular thing at that particular time.

But before we gave up there was always "one more chance," and the gardener in the story gave that fig tree "one more chance" as well.

The owner of the garden was more than justified in telling the gardener to take the tree out. Fig trees grow and bear fruit easily just about anywhere, especially in the climate of Israel.

For a tree that was three years old to still not be bearing any fruit was unusual and really wasting the soil. Most fig trees would have an abundance of fruit by that age!

So take it out! It's been taking up space in the garden long enough! It shouldn't have needed any manure or any cultivation, and yet it failed to bear fruit!

But gardeners are more patient with plants than most people are. After watching it grow for three years, that gardener didn't want to cut it down, didn't want to kill a living, green plant, even if it was unproductive! So he wanted one more chance to help it produce fruit, to do what it was created to do, to show the owner that it wasn't just a waste of space in the garden!

One more chance to give it what it needed so that it could do what it was meant to do.

It's interesting that this story of the fig tree that got one more chance comes right we read about Jesus answering a question about Pilate slaughtering Galileans as they worshiped, while they were making sacrifices to God. This was the ultimate sacrilege! Pilate was not only abusing his political power, but violating the holiness of worship.

The question was not quoted, but what Jesus was responding to was the common Jewish belief that bad things happened to people as a punishment for sin. And Jesus answers them quite clearly, with TWO examples, adding in the collapse of the tower of Siloam, which killed 18 people.

And so he addresses two types of catastrophes, mass murder and an accident. And Jesus is quite clear and very adamant in his answer.

Jesus tells them that these catastrophes were NOT retribution from God, that the Galileans who were murdered on orders from Pilate and the people killed by the falling tower were NOT worse sinners than anyone else!

And then he says something that seems contradictory to that----

He tells the people listening to him that unless they repent, they will all die just like those Galileans and the people killed by the falling tower.

It seems contradictory but it's really not. Repentance does not mean to grovel for forgiveness, to wallow in guilt. Repentance means "turning." One way to describe it is a paradigm shift---a change in the way we look at the world.

It is a literal turning. Just like we might turn our heads or even turn ourselves completely around to see things from a different angle, repentance is turning ourselves around to see things from a different perspective----God's perspective. To see others, to see the world, to see everything from God's point of view.

To see with the eyes of Christ, to love with the heart of Christ--- that is repentance.

And this brings us back to the story about the fig tree.

The owner of the tree could only see with his own eyes, and his eyes told him what was right in front of him----a fig tree with no figs is a useless tree, so take it out.

But the gardener could see what might be, what should be, what the tree was created to be! He knew that the tree had the potential to produce figs!

And so he wanted to give it one more chance. This particular tree not only needed another chance, though, it needed some extra help to reach its potential. So he determined to fertilize it and cultivate it and give it some extra care to help it fulfill its purpose.

We don't know the end of the story. Jesus doesn't say whether the tree ever produced fruit.

But the message is clear, and there are two parts of it.

First, stop blaming the victims, thinking it was because they were sinners, because everyone is a sinner.

And second, God gives us one more chance, and actually one more and one more and one more!

Not only does God give us another chance, but he also gives us what we need to make the most of that chance --- some extra loving care, some spiritual nourishment.

So that we can fulfill our purpose as children of God, to be the body of Christ and bear spiritual fruit-----love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control --- and to draw closer and closer to God.

God doesn't look at us as useless because we have not yet borne fruit . He gives us another chance to repent, to turn our lives around, to see things through his eyes, to love with his heart, to serve with his hands-----as the body of Christ, this is what we are created to do!

One more chance to understand, to correct our behavior, to do what it is that Christ teaches us to do.

This was Good News for the people listening to Jesus. It was Good News for the first hearers and readers of the Gospel according to Luke. And it's Good News for all of us today, as it has been in every time and place.

God does not take us out, does not cut us down. God always gives us another chance. More than that, he gives us the care and the nurture that we need to make the most of that chance.

When I gave my students "one more chance," I was often surprised that they would finally, finally start following the rules, or that after countless failures they would show me they really had learned what I had been trying to teach them! And then the celebration would take over the room!

And when one more chance was not enough, I was smart enough to put it aside for the time being and come back to that goal another day, using a different approach, with a lower frustration level for both of us.

And when I was wise enough, eventually I would give that child what he or she needed to learn whatever it was.

I once had a student named Joseph. He was the cutest little guy! He couldn't speak, but he did make sounds. The speech therapist had concluded that he would never speak, but soon after that I began to wonder if the sounds he was making were actually his attempts to speak, but we couldn't understand because he was learning Korean, which is what his parents spoke at home.

I gave him one more chance several times a day, asking him the same questions during our daily routine. And one day, it happened!

I asked Joseph what came next in our morning circle, and he said, clear as anything, CA-LEND-AR!!

I tell you, you never saw such a party as we had right then in that classroom! It was just the beginning of Joseph's words!

And God in heaven has a party just like that when any of us turn "one more chance" into our turn to become the person that God created us to be, to repent and change the paradigm we live by into God's paradigm, to stop seeing the way the world sees and start seeing the way God sees!

Repent and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven!
Repent and follow Christ right into the Kingdom! Repent and love and live following the example of Christ!

One more chance, every day, several times a day, to save your life by repenting, changing to be a fruitful, productive member of the body of Christ!

Repent, and let the party begin! Amen!