

Luke: Jesus and the Outsiders, Outcasts and Outlaws – 3. Heartbeat

Luke 18.9-14

March 12, 2023

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**Now I don't have a trained voice, but I've sung in choirs and contemporary groups and other groups in the churches I have served over my 42 years as a pastor. And I love all kinds of music. Rock. Folk. Country western. Jazz. Classical. It's easy for me to get immersed in a song—you can feel the heartbeat! Feel the heartbeat of yearning and lament in the Beatles' classic song Yesterday. (I guess I'm dating myself, aren't I?) Feel the heartbeat of country legend Loretta Lynn singing with such love for her roots in her classic song Coal Miner's Daughter. Feel the heartbeat of the cold, wet November gales of Superior in Gordon Lightfoot's The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald. Whenever I hear my wife Kay's compositions, I feel the heartbeat of sheer melodies, and a love for God that springs from Scripture, from God's panorama of land & sky, and from wanting everyone's voice to be heard. And as a violin performance major my first two years of college, I still remember the Christmas concert when a guest conductor took the baton for just one piece for our college orchestra. It was Handel's Overture to The Messiah, which had always seemed like a simple, almost ho-hum piece to me. But this was Franco Auteri, an Italian who had been Toscanini's associate conductor in New York. And when he took up the baton, suddenly a charge went through the whole orchestra and we played with such emotion, such fire that we never wanted it to end. Our hearts beat as one! Do you have a song or musical piece that you just get immersed in? Where you feel the heartbeat of life?

You can feel the heartbeat in music. You can feel the heartbeat in stories. Jesus was a master communicator, and you can feel the heartbeat of his teaching in his parables. Now parables use everyday experiences or everyday things to tweak our imaginations or get under our skin or surprise us to teach us about God's ways! Now sometimes parables are short, like the one about removing the log in your own eye before removing the speck in the other person's eye. And sometimes parables are stories, like the story of the Good Samaritan, or the story about the one lost sheep, or the woman who is sweeping, sweeping, sweeping as she desperately searches for the one precious lost coin just like God searches, searches, searches for what is lost (and sometimes that is you and me, if we are honest)!

Jesus is a master communicator—through short, almost one-liners, and through stories. Especially in the Gospel of Luke, on which we are focusing here at Messiah during Lent, Jesus uses parables to teach. If you look at the Synoptic gospels, Jesus gives us 38 parables in the gospel of Luke, compared to 31 in the gospel of Matthew, and just 9 in the gospel of Mark.

Let's dig into the parable before us this morning, from Luke chapter 18. Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Now I love this parable. First of all, it has characters! Neither the Pharisee nor the tax collector is a stoic Minnesotan, afraid to put themselves out there. Earlier this winter, I saw this when we were getting hit by yet another snowstorm:

Minnesotans when the snowstorm misses them.

Minnesotans when the snowstorm hits them but doesn't give them enough snow.

Minnesotans when the snowstorm hits them but gives them too much snow.

Stoic Minnesotans! On the other hand, Jesus paints both the Pharisee and the tax collector in vivid colors!

Second, I love this parable because it challenges us. I know it challenges me! You see, this Pharisee is spiritually very disciplined—I can get into that! This Pharisee fasts every Monday and Thursday like a devout Jewish person of the 1st century; he tithes 10% of his income, he's not a thief or a crook or an adulterer. But he reeks of judgmentalism! I thank you that I am not like other people—thieves, rogues, adulterers...you can smell the judgmentalism from a mile away!

I have a friend whose brother was so critical of him while they were growing up, who would criticize anything and everything he did, that he had to confront his brother and put an end to the criticism. He was Judgmental with a capital J. What does that do to the human spirit? What if we treated each other with a bit of awe as human beings instead? Like the English headmaster who would bow before his class each day. Why? Because, he said, he knew that some of real thinkers and writers and leaders of England just might come from that class. But that didn't mean he didn't PUSH them—gifts and talents need to be brought out! But pushing them is not judgmentalism. Before retirement on July 1st (actu-ally semi-retirement now!), I served Centennial United Methodist Church in Roseville for 20 years, and not too long ago we did a sermon series on why young adults are turned off by organized religion—that is, organized Christ-ianity. It was based on research done by the Barna Group, one of the pre-mier leading public opinion research firms in the church today, and we did a message on judgmentalism being one of the leading reasons why young adults are leaving organized religion—which continues to be the case today. I thank you that I am not like these other people, bragged the Pharisee in his prayer. Judgmentalism often serves as a coverup for selfishness, greed, hypocrisy, or other flaws that hide underneath the surface in any of our lives. As my pastor when I was growing up down in Blue Earth used to remind us, when you start pointing your finger at others, just remember that you have three fingers pointing back at yourself!

All right, just a word of caution before we move on. Some of the Pharisees, not all of them, opposed Jesus in the Gospels. Some were terribly judgmental and legalistic and hypocritical. But do not paint the Pharisees with too broad of a brush. We make a terrible mistake when we stereotype them. Historians remind us that the Pharisees had their work cut out for them. They were caught up in the swirling storm of the Roman occupation, along with the other forceful religious groups: The Zealots, who sought to forcibly throw out the Romans (including the Sicarii who assassinated Roman officials and soldiers); The Essenes, purists who went out into the desert to form their own separated community to stay away from the corruption of the wider world; And the Sadducees, who were the priests who largely collaborated with the Roman occupiers in order to 1) keep the Jewish temple services going, and 2) in order to stay in power. The Sadducees had a very strict view of the Jewish Scriptures, that everything had to be based strictly on the Written Law of the Torah. The Pharisees on the other hand—to their great credit—sought to make the Torah a living Word. They also sought to listen to the Prophets and the dynamic Jewish oral traditions that were committed to applying the Scriptures to the practical questions of everyday life. So the Pharisees sought to keep the spirit of the Law, not just the dry, dead letter of the Law. The Pharisees were intrigued by Jesus—remember that the Pharisees invited Jesus to meals with them, and that the Pharisee Nicodemus helped to care for Jesus' body after he died, and that Paul was a Pharisee. Historians tell us that there were Pharisees who became part of the Jesus movement. Do not stereotype all the Pharisees—some of them DID fall prey to being judgmental. Just like you and I can. Friends, this is a Word from Jesus to each of us in our often polarized world today!

Just to add a word here. Never forget that Jesus was a devout Jewish believer engaged in an ongoing conversation with fellow Jews about the Scriptures and (profoundly & significantly, yes!) about what God was doing. He was steeped in the traditions and practices and Holy Writings of the Jewish faith. We must

never allow the Christian gospels and the rest of the New Testament to support the antisemitism that has started to run rampant again in our day.

All right, first we noted that this parable has characters (when I was serving internships in North Carolina during seminary, people would say Isn't he a card? Isn't she a card?). Second, we noted that this parable challenges any judgmentalism or antisemitism that could hide in our souls. Third and finally today, I love this parable because it brings us back to the heartbeat of earthiness. Now remember, Christian faith is both earthy and spiritual, inextricably bound together. Our faith tells us that God made us from the dust of the earth. Our Christian faith is incarnational—the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, not God remote in the ethereal heavens somewhere! Where does the tax collector look when he is praying to God in Jesus' parable? Now remember that tax collectors in Jesus' day collected taxes for the hated Roman occupiers, and they were allowed to collect extra for themselves off the top. So they were collaborators with Rome, and they lived high off the hog doing so! Where does the tax collector look when he is praying at the Temple? We read that he "[stands] far off, [and] would not even look up to heaven." He's looking at the ground! There's earthiness here! And we read that he was "beating his breast and saying 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" You gotta love his gut honesty, you gotta love his spiritual and earthy honesty! He's looking down at the ground (earthy), he's beating his breast (earthy—you can feel it in your bones!), he's laying it all out before God—God, be merciful to me, a sinner! There's an earthiness to his gut transparency before God that we can all learn from: God, be merciful to me, a sinner!

Now sin is a reality, let's be real. But our Christian faith does not major in sin—it majors in grace, God's grace, God's unconditional free gift of love for us shown most clearly in Jesus! Remember that in Genesis, God made us in original blessing, that "God saw everything that he had made, and it was good!" You see, Christian faith does not hide from the fact of sin but it also does not major in it—it majors in grace! In fact, the classical theological formulation is that we are both (in Latin) Simul justus et peccator, both saint and sinner at the same time. And you and I can be honest with God; by the grace of God, you and I can change with the tax collector: God, be merciful to me, a sinner! It's a journey. Because of God's grace, because of God's unconditional love, we can always be real with God, we can always change, we can always grow—for the sake of ourselves, for the sake of our loved ones, for the sake of our neighbors, for the sake of our planet. It's a life-long journey.

One time I was at a 90th birthday party, and at one point the guest of honor took me aside and was reflecting a bit. "I wish I had learned a lot earlier in my life that there is more to life than work. I didn't learn it till I was 60," he said, "and it would have made such a difference in my life." It was his way of confession—in a way that was so attractive because it was gut honest, and it led me to really reflect anew on my own life. It was earthy, but downright spiritual, off to the side of his 90th birthday party. I could tell that it was life-giving to him, and it was life-giving to me. It meant something for the past, for the present, and for the future. And I felt the heartbeat of God. It reminded me of what the writer Frederick Buechner once said about repentance (which in Old Testament Hebrew means to turn to God). Buechner said: True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying 'I'm sorry' than to the future and saying 'Wow!'" That's the heartbeat of God. For the sake of your life and mine. For the sake of our planet.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 12, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, open my eyes and my ears to what you would have me read and hear today. Through your Holy Word, convict me, challenge me, and comfort me. Open my mind to new insights and fresh perspectives. Open my heart to the moving of your Spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ, your son, amen.

Note: We are reading the entire gospel of Luke in the GPS. Some days readings are longer than usual. We hope you'll have an extra cup of coffee, or use your lunch break, and read Luke's entire story of Jesus.

Monday, March 13

Scripture: Luke 10:25 – 11:13

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"

He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"

Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me."

The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Jesus told them, "When you pray, say:

'Father, uphold the holiness of your name.

Bring in your kingdom.

Give us the bread we need for today.

Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us.

And don't lead us into temptation.'"

He also said to them, "Imagine that one of you has a friend and you go to that friend in the middle of the night. Imagine saying, 'Friend, loan me three loaves of bread because a friend of mine on a journey has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.' Imagine further that he answers from within the house, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up to give you anything.' I assure you, even if he wouldn't get up and help because of his friendship, he will get up and give his friend whatever he needs because of his friend's brashness. And I tell you: Ask and you will

receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened.

“Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

Observation

As Jesus chose “to go to Jerusalem” (9:51), he met more and more legal experts and Pharisees testing him with questions that sought to trap him. He answered the tricky question in 10:29 with a story showing vividly what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. He told his friend Martha it was vital to make him her first priority, and he taught his disciples how to pray—and why.

Application

The Samaritan (in Israel today he'd be a “Palestinian”) in Jesus' story put the injured man on “his own donkey” (i.e., he walked), took him to an inn, cared for him, paid two days wages, and offered to pay more if needed on his return. How did that story reflect God's vast generosity to us? How can knowing God's been generous to you make you more generous to your neighbors?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, give me the bread I need for today. And give me your presence, too, because, in the words of the song, “this is my daily bread.” Amen.

Tuesday, March 14

Scripture: Luke 11:37 – 12:7

While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to share a meal with him, so Jesus went and took his place at the table. When the Pharisee saw that Jesus didn't ritually purify his hands by washing before the meal, he was astonished.

The Lord said to him, “Now, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and platter, but your insides are stuffed with greed and wickedness. Foolish people! Didn't the one who made the outside also make the inside? Therefore, give to those in need from the core of who you are and you will be clean all over.

“How terrible for you Pharisees! You give a tenth of your mint, rue, and garden herbs of all kinds, while neglecting justice and love for God. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others.

“How terrible for you Pharisees! You love the most prominent seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.

“How terrible for you! You are like unmarked graves, and people walk on them without recognizing it.”

One of the legal experts responded, “Teacher, when you say these things, you are insulting us too.”

Jesus said, “How terrible for you legal experts too! You load people down with impossible burdens and you refuse to lift a single finger to help them.

“How terrible for you! You built memorials to the prophets, whom your ancestors killed. In this way, you testify that you approve of your ancestors' deeds. They killed the prophets, and you build memorials!

Therefore, God's wisdom has said, ‘I will send prophets and apostles to them and they will harass and kill some of them.’ As a result, this generation will be charged with the murder of all the prophets since the beginning of time. This includes the murder of every prophet—from Abel to Zechariah—who was killed between the altar and the holy place. Yes, I'm telling you, this generation will be charged with it.

“How terrible for you legal experts! You snatched away the key of knowledge. You didn't enter yourselves, and you stood in the way of those who were entering.”

As he left there, the legal experts and Pharisees began to resent him deeply and to ask him pointed questions about many things. They plotted against him, trying to trap him in his words.

When a crowd of thousands upon thousands had gathered so that they were crushing each other, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples: “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees—I mean, the mismatch between their hearts and lives. Nothing is hidden that won’t be revealed, and nothing is secret that won’t be brought out into the open. Therefore, whatever you have said in the darkness will be heard in the light, and whatever you have whispered in the rooms deep inside the house will be announced from the rooftops. “I tell you, my friends, don’t be terrified by those who can kill the body but after that can do nothing more. I’ll show you whom you should fear: fear the one who, after you have been killed, has the authority to throw you into hell. Indeed, I tell you, that’s the one you should fear. Aren’t five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one of them is overlooked by God. Even the hairs on your head are all counted. Don’t be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.

Observation

As Jesus moved steadily toward Jerusalem, the tension between the status quo and God’s kingdom kept building. Jesus challenged religious and political leaders who fixated on washing for ritual purity (not for hygiene—they didn’t yet know about viruses). Their only response was to plot against him. Jesus gave a wide-ranging set of warnings against a “mismatch between . . . hearts and lives” (12:1). He knew that faithfulness and trust flow from the inside out.

Application

With powerful people plotting against him, we might think Jesus would be afraid. But he defined “security” very differently than humans typically do. Scholar N. T. Wright summed up his teaching: “One should recognize who the ultimate enemy is. In this picture, God is not the enemy to be feared; he is one to trust, the one who values his children more highly than a whole flock of sparrows, who has the very hairs of our head all numbered.” How does Jesus’ teaching challenge our culture’s messages about how to attain true security?

Prayer

King Jesus, it’s hard for me to make the inside of me match the outside sometimes. Help me desire your kingdom of eternal security and fulfillment above all else. Amen.

Wednesday, March 15

Scripture: Luke 12:8-34

“I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before humans, the Human One will acknowledge before God’s angels. But the one who rejects me before others will be rejected before God’s angels. Anyone who speaks a word against the Human One will be forgiven, but whoever insults the Holy Spirit won’t be forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, rulers, and authorities, don’t worry about how to defend yourself or what you should say. The Holy Spirit will tell you at that very moment what you must say.”

Someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Jesus said to him, “Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?”

Then Jesus said to them, “Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions, even when someone is very wealthy.” Then he told them a parable: “A certain rich man’s land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I’ll store all my grain and goods. I’ll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. But God said to him, ‘Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?’ This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. There is more to life than food and more to the body than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither plant nor harvest, they have no silo or barn, yet God feeds them. You are worth so much more than birds! Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? If you can’t do such a small thing, why worry about the rest? Notice how the lilies grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, how much more will God do for you, you people of weak faith! Don’t chase after what you will eat and what you will drink. Stop worrying. All the nations of the world long for these things. Your Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.

“Don’t be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights in giving you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to those in need. Make for yourselves wallets that don’t wear out—a treasure in heaven that never runs out. No thief comes near there, and no moth destroys. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be too.

Observation

Jesus used a simple, sobering parable to get his listeners (and us) to consider how far ahead our plans reach. For the rich fool hoarding his large crop, the sad answer was, “Not nearly far enough.” Jesus no doubt appalled some hearers by saying, “One’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions.” This life, and the material goods we enjoy in it, will end. Only God can (and does) offer us eternity.

Application

Jesus spoke sadly of “those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God.” His story said what we work (maybe even fight) so hard for does us no good when we die. Has your desire for material goods ever damaged your relationships with people or God? What helps you make sensible material plans without letting the stuff you think you “own” actually “own” you?

Prayer

Loving God, in fall foliage or spring flowers, every morning and every evening, you delight in giving to me. Keep my generosity growing, even though it will never match the scale of yours. Amen.

Thursday, March 16

Scripture: Luke 12:35-59

“Be dressed for service and keep your lamps lit. Be like people waiting for their master to come home from a wedding celebration, who can immediately open the door for him when he arrives and knocks on the door. Happy are those servants whom the master finds waiting up when he arrives. I assure you that, when he arrives, he will dress himself to serve, seat them at the table as honored guests, and wait on them. Happy are those whom he finds alert, even if he comes at midnight or just before dawn. But know this, if the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he wouldn’t have allowed his home to be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Human One is coming at a time when you don’t expect him.”

Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?”

The Lord replied, “Who are the faithful and wise managers whom the master will put in charge of his household servants, to give them their food at the proper time? Happy are the servants whom the master finds fulfilling their responsibilities when he comes. I assure you that the master will put them in charge of all his possessions.

“But suppose that these servants should say to themselves, My master is taking his time about coming. And suppose they began to beat the servants, both men and women, and to eat, drink, and get drunk. The master of those servants would come on a day when they weren’t expecting him, at a time they couldn’t

predict. The master will cut them into pieces and assign them a place with the unfaithful. That servant who knew his master's will but didn't prepare for it or act on it will be beaten severely. The one who didn't know the master's will but who did things deserving punishment will be beaten only a little. Much will be demanded from everyone who has been given much, and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked.

"I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze! I have a baptism I must experience. How I am distressed until it's completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division. From now on, a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three. Father will square off against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother; and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Jesus also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, 'It's going to rain.' And indeed it does. And when a south wind blows, you say, 'A heat wave is coming.' And it does. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret conditions on earth and in the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret the present time? And why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you are going to court with your accuser, make your best effort to reach a settlement along the way. Otherwise, your accuser may bring you before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you won't get out of there until you have paid the very last cent."

Observation

Few of us want to be earthly "servants," but Jesus used that image for our relationship to God. Good servants were always ready to respond to their masters. Bad ones lost their jobs (or, in Roman times, even worse). Jesus didn't endorse Roman cruelty. He simply made the point that choosing to serve God is a matter of eternal life or death.

Application

Jesus' words about bringing division rather than peace (12:51-53) may strike us as odd. Isn't Jesus "the prince of peace" (Isaiah 9:6)? Yes—but he knew his kingdom's principles (including peace) were so unlike the world's that at times they'd cause division. Have family members, friends or co-workers ever misread or criticized choices rooted in your loyalty to God?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for equipping and calling me to serve. Make me a "faithful and wise manager," valuing myself and who you made me to be. Amen.

Friday, March 17

Scripture: Luke 13:1-30

Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. He replied, "Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did."

Jesus told this parable: "A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, 'Look, I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I've never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil's nutrients?' The gardener responded, 'Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.'"

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. A woman was there who had been disabled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and couldn't stand up straight. When he saw her,

Jesus called her to him and said, “Woman, you are set free from your sickness.” He placed his hands on her and she straightened up at once and praised God.

The synagogue leader, incensed that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, responded, “There are six days during which work is permitted. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath day.”

The Lord replied, “Hypocrites! Don’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from its stall and lead it out to get a drink? Then isn’t it necessary that this woman, a daughter of Abraham, bound by Satan for eighteen long years, be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath day?” When he said these things, all his opponents were put to shame, but all those in the crowd rejoiced at all the extraordinary things he was doing.

Jesus asked, “What is God’s kingdom like? To what can I compare it? It’s like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in a garden. It grew and developed into a tree and the birds in the sky nested in its branches.”

Again he said, “To what can I compare God’s kingdom? It’s like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through the whole.”

Jesus traveled through cities and villages, teaching and making his way to Jerusalem. Someone said to him, “Lord, will only a few be saved?”

Jesus said to them, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow gate. Many, I tell you, will try to enter and won’t be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and shuts the door, then you will stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open the door for us.’ He will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you are from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ He will respond, ‘I don’t know you or where you are from. Go away from me, all you evildoers!’ There will be weeping and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in God’s kingdom, but you yourselves will be thrown out. People will come from east and west, north and south, and sit down to eat in God’s kingdom. Look! Those who are last will be first and those who are first will be last.”

Observation

Speaking to the tragedy of Roman soldiers killing Galileans, Jesus rebutted the idea that bad things always showed God’s wrath. He told a strange parable, one that left hearers to think about how the story might end. He relieved a woman’s 18 years of suffering “at once,” but upset the synagogue leader by doing it on the Sabbath. He defied the spirit that loved rules above people and kept moving toward Jerusalem (verse 22).

Application

We could call Jesus’ story (13:6-9) “The Unfinished Parable.” The gardener pleaded for one more year to help the tree bear fruit—but Jesus never said if the tree responded or not. Verse 13:5 showed what kind of “fruit-bearing” was on his mind. What about you—how will you finish the unfinished parable?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you dig up the soil around me, water and fertilize, and watch eagerly for my life to show your fruit. Help me to respond so that my life may indeed bear fruit to your glory. Amen.

Saturday, March 18

Scripture: Luke 13:31 – 14:24

At that time, some Pharisees approached Jesus and said, “Go! Get away from here, because Herod wants to kill you.” Jesus said to them, “Go, tell that fox, ‘Look, I’m throwing out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will complete my work. However, it’s necessary for me to travel today, tomorrow, and the next day because it’s impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn’t want that.

Look, your house is abandoned. I tell you, you won't see me until the time comes when you say, Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name."

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to share a meal in the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, they were watching him closely. A man suffering from an abnormal swelling of the body was there. Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Does the Law allow healing on the Sabbath or not?" But they said nothing. Jesus took hold of the sick man, cured him, and then let him go. He said to them, "Suppose your child or ox fell into a ditch on the Sabbath day. Wouldn't you immediately pull it out?" But they had no response. When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the best seats at the table, he told them a parable. "When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don't take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host. The host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give your seat to this other person.' Embarrassed, you will take your seat in the least important place. Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, 'Friend, move up here to a better seat.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can't repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected."

When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom."

Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.' One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Observation

Jesus spoke four "laments" in Luke over Jerusalem (verses 33-35; also 19:41-44, 21:20-24 and 23:27-31.) Jesus "spoiled" a Sabbath dinner by healing—again. Pharisees loved to imagine God's end-time feast (verse 15, an image from Isaiah 25:6-10). Isaiah said it would be for "the whole earth;" the religious leaders limited it to their own people. But Jesus said since the chosen didn't come, God invited street people!

Application

Have you ever known (maybe even been) a person like the ones Jesus noticed who aggressively "sought out the best seats at the table"? In what ways can that attitude show itself in school, the workplace, family, even church? What's the difference between healthy boldness to make your gifts available to bless others, and the kind of self-promotion Jesus warned against?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, yes! I want to be a guest at your great end-time feast. Give me a heart that will rejoice in being there even if some of the other guests might surprise me at first. Amen.