

Scriptures: Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9

## **Reframed**

Our Lenten series this year, “Reframed,” considers what it means for us to be followers of Jesus Christ, and how walking with Him to the cross looks today. We’re in the process of reframing our lives through this season as we prepare for Easter. During the first week, we talked about God’s panoramic perspective, which we see through the lens of Scripture as Jesus demonstrated while being tempted in the wilderness. Last week, we were invited to get in the picture as we discovered that we’re all a part of God’s family.

Today as we reframe our thinking, we’re being offered the opportunity for a second chance. All of us need second chances, don’t we? If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 13:1-9. **Read Luke 13:1-9.**

I picture the opening scene of today’s Gospel lesson about like us getting together in Sunday School class and as we’re reading Scripture together, starting to talk about current events happening in the news. We’re told, “Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices,” (Luke 13:1). Apparently there was a group of Jews from Galilee who had gone to the temple to offer sacrifices, and while they were in there, Pilate had sent Roman soldiers in and killed them, and there are a few folks in the crowd who bring it up to Jesus. It’s a “Hey, have you heard the latest?” kind of thing.

## **Whose Fault Is It?**

Hidden in their question, is the real question – whose fault is it? Did they deserve their awful death because they were being punished by God for their sins? Or is Pilate to blame, because if so, is this a cause for rebellion? Both questions speak to different things that the people of the time believed.

They thought – and some people still have this mindset – that God punished in real-time. Or, that they were an occupied people whose God was being disrespected by those in power. Hidden just below the surface was the hope that they would see God’s curses and punishments come upon their enemies – foreign and domestic. Jesus doesn’t even bother taking the political bait and address the wrong done by Pilate. He focuses on the real heart of the matter for His people.

“Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?’” (verse 2). Does sin make bad things happen? Of course it does. But is every bad thing that happens to someone a personal punishment for their sin? Sometimes you’ll even hear Christians make comments about God hating them – He doesn’t – or about karma getting them. What goes around comes around. God doesn’t usually operate in that mode. He pours out grace upon grace on us, and we very often do not get what we deserve.

## **Unless You Repent, You Too Will Perish**

Bad things that happen are not immediate, personal punishments for sin. Jesus tells us this Himself in the next verse. He says, “I tell you, no! But unless you repent,

you too will all perish,” (verse 3). The Galileans who died in the temple weren’t any more sinful than any of their neighbors.

Jesus then talks about another recent tragedy. He mentions the “eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them,” (verse 4a). Siloam was a neighborhood in Jerusalem. He fine tunes their question, “Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?” (4b). Were they way worse people than anyone else?

Again, Jesus has a response, “I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish,” (verse 5). Modern-day United Methodist theologian Justo Gonzalez summarizes the gist of Jesus’ answer as, “The surprising thing is not that so many die, but that we all live. If it were a matter of sin, we would all be dead.” In those days, the people were living with an eye-for-an-eye mentality. And they viewed God as having that sort of mindset, too.

### **Flipping Tables and Mindsets**

The reason the people were so fixated on this idea, and bring it to Jesus, is that they want to hear Him say, “Oh, you aren’t that bad. You aren’t as bad as *those* people.” That’s really what this all boils down to. They see Jesus doing all these great miracles and stuff – they know He’s holy, and close to God – they want to hear Him say the things their itching ears want to hear. They want Him to confirm to them that they aren’t that bad.

Since they aren’t reaping the bad outcomes from what they’ve been sowing, while others are getting their comeuppance, there’s no need for them to change the way they live. They’ll still be better than the Jews of Galilee, or Pilate, depending on the way Jesus responds to them. That’s their thinking. But instead of reassuring them, Jesus tells it like it is and proverbially flips the tables over regarding the way they think God works.

Twice He tells them, “Unless you repent, you too will all perish,” (verses 3 and 5). We get hung up on the idea of repentance. You look in a dictionary, and it tells you it means to feel remorse, to feel shame, and sorrow over things we know we’ve done wrong. And there’s truth in that. When we sin, especially when we knowingly sin, we should feel some contrition. We should feel some heartache in knowing that we’ve disappointed the Person – and that’s God Almighty – who loves us most.

### **Turning Away From Sin**

But if we feel sorrow, yet keep on going right back to the same sin again and again, have we really repented of it? Repentance also has a component to it of turning away from the sin and moving away from it. This is the piece we often miss today. The Church talks a good game about feeling shame and sorrow – but they don’t talk as much about the turning away from those actions which cause us the shame and sorrow, or the need for other followers of Jesus Christ to hold us accountable in doing it. Church, I hope if there’s a sin you’ve been wrestling with, that you feel sorrow and shame, you repent over – but you find yourself doing it time and time again – I hope you’ll be bold in speaking whatever that is, and surround yourself with people here in our church family to help hold you accountable and keep you on the straight and narrow path!

To get the point across, Jesus tells 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.” (verses 6-9).

In His way of making this applicable to His audience, Jesus is telling them that their

moment of decision is coming near. Those who ignore the call to repentance and new life are like the fig tree that repeatedly failed to bear fruit. By looking and asking about everyone else instead of wondering about themselves, the people were failing to see they weren’t producing the kind of life God desired. The owner of the vineyard is ready to chop the unproductive tree down, but his gardener petitions for some grace, and commits himself to heaping extra care and attention on the tree to see if he can turn it around and make it productive. If after tending it for a year, there’s no change, the gardener agrees he’ll cut it down.

### **Retakes**

Do you remember when we were in school, and they would send home gigantic envelopes with us, about school photographs? They’d get Lange’s Photography to come down from Wapakoneta to take all the school pictures at Houston, usually in the fall, and all the parents had their kids wear some of their best clothes for picture day. Button down shirts or polo shirts – we never dressed that way any other time – but on picture day, you dressed as good as you could. And then, you’d get called down class by class, or grade by grade, and while you were waiting in line, Lange’s assistants would pass out combs to the boys, and everyone would comb their hair.

Of course, you got to keep the comb. Well, sometimes in the combing process, you’d mess up your hairdo. And they’d send a paper out with the developed photographs telling when “Picture retake day” would be. Remember “retake day?” Our young people may not know this, but in those days, you didn’t know how your picture was going to turn out until after it was all over, and they printed them.

Today, we can instantly see our snapshots on our phones or digital cameras. We don’t have to wait for pictures to be developed. In a split second, we can take a second shot if we didn’t get it right the first time and do it again if that one isn’t right. School pictures took a long time to get back – we’re talking weeks! And if you had to do a retake, you hoped and prayed that the retake would turn out a lot better, so that the moms wouldn’t be bent out of shape!

### **Barren Fig Trees**

Going back to Jesus’ parable of the fig tree, how many barren fig trees do we have in our lives? Things we’ve planted, nurtured, prayed over, and longed for. It’s a stock that we keep investing in that never seems to grow. Or a job we keep investing in, where we get no recognition, promotion, or raises. Or the school you keep going back to, young people, even though you don’t see a benefit from it. Or it’s a

relationship that keeps sucking the life out of you, but you just can't give it up. Or maybe – and we'll talk some more on this next week – maybe it's an adult child or two who we've loved their whole lives, but they've completely turned their backs on us. Or a faith journey that seems dry and pointless, but we keep hoping, waiting, yearning for new life to spring up from the dust.

We all have a barren fig tree – or two – in our lives. And we may be tempted to think, “Life would be so much easier if I just let it go,” or put another way, “Cut it down!” as the owner of the vineyard says. But the gardener encourages the owner to do a retake. Give it just one more year, one more chance, one more last-ditch effort. With a little extra care and a little more fertilizer – or from a theological standpoint we might say a little change of heart and life – maybe it'll produce fruit next year.

In a world filled with information available at our fingertips, we want answers to our problems. We want instant and understandable solutions to account for our pain. We don't merely insist on fast, reliable, and convenient delivery for goods and commodities – we also expect the same kind of service for our deepest traumas. We want to see the line connecting the cause with the result. We want an instant retake of a picture that's blurry, out-of-focus, or downright embarrassing. All it takes is the simple push of a button!

### **God Offers Retakes**

The problem, though, is our pain – and the world's pain – cannot be easily explained away, just so we can go about our days satisfied. Sometimes we settle for answers to feel closure, whether the answers are true or not. Maybe someone suffered because of their self-inflicted choice to sin – but maybe not. It's not our place to decide. Our gracious God lovingly offers us retakes – Jesus proves that to us at the cross. Maybe if we lean into the hopeful encouragement offered by the gardener in the parable, we would find the strength we need to trust that God is at work through the fertilizer of repentance, even in the absence of what would appear as growth, production, answers, solutions, or closure.

Jesus doesn't provide a resolution to the story. He ends the parable with a cliffhanger, as He often does in the Gospel. We know how the first three years of the fig tree's life went, but He leaves the fourth to our imagination. Hopefully, the owner of the vineyard took the gardener up on his advice. Hopefully, we will do likewise. I mean, what if you're just one moment, one conversation, one act of repentance, one retake away from the result you desire for true freedom and new life in Jesus?

**Prayer:** God of infinite goodness, throughout the ages You have persevered in claiming and reclaiming Your people. Renew for us Your call to repentance, surround us with witnesses to aid us in our journey, and grant us the time to fashion our lives anew, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.