The Venerable Rena Turnham
Third Sunday in Lent
March 23, 2025
St. John's - Minneapolis
Luke 13:1-9

'There's still time…'

Today's gospel reading is about repentance and judgment.

It's is an invitation, a call, and a warning - that time is running out for us to turn from sin toward God.

Repentance is more than saying "I'm sorry." It's the transformative process of making amends and living as Jesus teaches us.

It's how we get back on the road to Walk the Way of Love.

It's hard work—confession, commitment, and real change—done again and again. And when we're stuck, we suffer. Often others do too.

Jesus said,

> "No, I tell you; unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

He's saying that there's still time for you, for us.

But there is an endpoint and there will be judgment.

In the first half of the gospel reading, we get this stern warning. But that's not the end of Jesus' message. He goes on to tell us a parable, his way of teaching about the nature of God and God's Kingdom.

Here he teaches that we have the opportunity to seek change and to receive God's grace. This is the hope Jesus offers his followers that day, and to us.

What will we do with this time we've been given?

It doesn't just matter at the end; it also matters in the middle—in this in-between time between the Resurrection and Jesus' coming again.

The gospel writer Luke was speaking to followers of Jesus who had been anxiously expecting Jesus' return, decades after the Resurrection. So, this was a message of hope for a people who felt abandoned and forgotten .

Have you ever seen that bumper sticker that says, "Jesus is coming. Look busy!"?

Is that what this parable is about—just looking busy? Living in a kind of frenetic, perpetual, do-gooder state?

What Jesus is talking about is deeper than that. It's not just about signs of activity; it's about transformation. Internal transformation. The kind that doesn't always show on the surface but changes everything underneath. It's as much about what's unseen as what's seen.

And in this gospel text, the story stops before we see any transformation.

We never do find out what happens to the fig tree.

Did it bear fruit?

Or was it cut down?

What happened in the soil, or with the trunk or with the branches?

What happens between the warning and the grace?

This is the in-between time.

We may not know what tomorrow holds but today there's still time to turn - to be nourished, and to bear fruit.

And this message isn't just personal—it's also corporate --for the collective sin of empires, systems that oppress, and entire communities.

Jesus tells us that while there is a time of judgment ahead, what we do with the time we're given matters, we're re not just waiting—we're called to participate now, to take responsibility now, to help bring about God's Kingdom now. Not later.

Jesus' message reached into the hardest of places, and it still does.

This week I learned of such a place… one that has shaken me:

A chaplain friend reached out to me this week.

He said he was really struggling.

He'd been called to be with a family in crisis, alongside the pastor of their church. The father, who here I'll call Alberto, had just been incarcerated.

He is facing charges of murder, torture, and racketeering, as he is suspected of being a member of a violent gang that has moved from Central America into the southern parts of the United States.

Alberto is now awaiting trial—in Florida.

Alberto is facing the death penalty.

My friend and the other pastor had spent hours with the family and their three children that evening.

They are a family caught in the wake of violence and fear. And my friend—this deeply faithful, compassionate man—felt completely helpless.

"There's no way this ends well," he told me. "There are no good options. No way out. I have nothing to offer Alberto and his family."

Then he broke down. He sobbed. He wailed. Barely getting the words out, he said, "I've never felt like this. I've never been so affected by a pastoral situation in this way."

In that moment, I did the only thing I knew to do.

I sat with him in the weight of it all.

And I reminded him of the truth we both know – even when it's hopeless and hard to feel.

I put my arm around his shoulder and held his hand. I said gently,

> "You do have something to offer…You can offer them love. You can offer them hope - what Jesus offers us…a way of life that's greater than freedom from prison or even death. There's still time."

I looked him in the eyes and asked, "Do you believe this? Do you believe it's true for you too?"

And then I went on to say,

> "You can show up and live in that truth. Be with them in this moment. You're the one God has sent to be love, to be present, to be hope."

There are no solutions to offer Alberto. No way to undo what has been done, no way to escape the consequences—no path out of the machine that seems determined to march this man toward death.

But there is hope. Not only in the life to come but in the possibility of new life in the present.

There's still time to live a life that bears fruit.

What this may mean for Alberto is unknown. It's for him to discern. There will be opportunities, to be sure, because God's invitation to live a fruitful life is always there.

My chaplain friend said he hopes to visit Alberto in prison and bring him the Eucharist—the sacrament of Christian hope and Christ's promise of new life. So, Alberto can re-member, that he is part of the Body of Christ, that he belongs to God.

Alberto is a Christian who has lost his way. All one can do as a fellow follower of Jesus is to love him as he is and invite him back to the Way of Love.

Any judgment to be rendered is from God when that time comes.

We do not know the hour or the day, but it will come.

It would be easy to make this parable only about the individual. It's more than that.

It's about calling out the sin of systems and governments that oppress. It's the call to bring the transformation of change before it's too late.

Our God is a loving, patient God. That's why we are presented, over and over, chances to do better, to do the right thing. Not just for ourselves but for the sake of the other.

What cruel irony for Alberto, that he will likely be put to death, executed, in the richest, most civilized nation in the world.

Or worse, he'll be sent back to his home country to live out his days in a mega-prison, enduring unimaginable suffering until his eventual death.

Alberto's story doesn't exist in a vacuum. It reflects complex interconnected systems that shape many lives—with deeply rooted problems and no easy solutions, and few redemptive pathways.

Gang violence in parts of Central America has deep roots in decades of poverty, conflict, and social upheaval. During and after the civil wars of the 1980s, many families fled to the United States in search of safety and stability. In the face of marginalization and limited opportunities, some vulnerable youth found identity and protection in gangs.

In the 1990s and 2000s, U.S. deportation policies returned many of these young people to countries struggling with fragile governments and few resources for reintegration. Over time, some gang networks grew and reconnected across borders, including in parts of the United States, through migration and trafficking.

In our own communities, gang involvement has often been fueled by social exclusion, trauma, and a lack of supportive services—especially for immigrant families and youth.

While many policies have aimed to reduce violence through enforcement, few have been aimed at addressing the deeper causes: poverty, displacement, historical trauma, and systemic inequality.

The story is complex—but what is clear is that countless lives are caught in the web of forces far beyond their control. Alberto is part of this story, both his choices, and his suffering.

We're not separate from that web. As followers of Jesus, we are called not only to see it, but to respond to it.

There is hope that Alberto's story may end differently. It's not over.

As Christians we are called to hold all of this at once—to love the prisoner, sit with the sinner, practice and preach repentance and forgiveness, and call for mercy, justice and peace, and the transformation of unjust systems.

The love of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ is also for this man, Alberto.

Christ meets him in his confinement.

His hope is not in the legal system, in gang members, his public defender, in the US government or in the government of his home country. His hope is the invitation of new life in Christ.

The fig tree's fate is unknown. But it was given a little more time.

So are we.

That time isn't just a gift. It's a call. A chance to change. To bear fruit that nourishes others.

What will you do with this time?

What in you needs tending, turning, or transformation?

Who around you is hungry for hope, justice, or mercy?

And what fruit might we bear—together, as a church—that feeds a world aching for new life?

This is my prayer my friend, for us, and for Alberto - the collect for today:

Living Mystery, whose way is not ours, whose name cannot be bought or sold: lead us from justice without compassion and sacrifice without mercy to a love which nurtures, and a grace without price; through Jesus Christ, the true Bread. Amen.