

Our Gospel reading has been referred by some as the “tale of two stories” but I prefer to liken it to three stories.

As we continue our Lenten journey the lectionary brings us to this reading from Luke 13. It’s a two-parter. The first part focuses on two disasters. The first has to do with the story of the Roman governor Pilate mixing the blood of eighteen Galileans with their sacrifices. Were they greater sinners than other Galileans? Here might be time for some righteous anger directed at the oppressive governor, but Jesus turns the question on the questioners, and suggests that if they don’t repent something similar might befall them. Then there’s story of a tower in Jerusalem that fell and killed a goodly number. Were they greater sinners than other residents of the city? No, but if you don’t repent you might suffer the same fate. As I read this, Jesus doesn’t want to link sin and these actions and events. What he wants to do, I think, is to call our attention to our own sins. Repent he says. Don’t worry about what others do, be accountable for your own actions. If they are unworthy of God, then do something about it.

The second part of the passage deals with fruit – more specifically a fig tree and the correlation between our actions and words and how they reflect the gospel. Pope Francis entered the political

fray recently suggesting that building walls (on the Mexican-American border) isn't a Christian act. This proved offensive to at least one candidate (the one at whom it was likely directed), but here's the question, should we not expect a person of faith to act in a way that accords with their faith? Do words of hate and exclusion, or words and actions that bully others, not merit some attention? Shouldn't the way we act in life accord with our Christian profession of faith? Are we not accountable for what we say and do? Are there not ultimate consequences for this?

Jesus offers an answer of sorts to this question in a parable about a fig tree. What would you do he asks, if you owned an orchard filled with fig trees, and one of those trees no longer bore fruit. Would you let it sit there taking up space or would you rip it out? According to the parable, the owner came to check out his orchard for three years, and each year noticed that this particular tree had failed to bear fruit. The land owner told the gardener to rip it out. Would you have done the same? The gardener, however, isn't ready to take this ultimate step quite yet. Instead the gardener proposes that another year be given to the tree. It's not an open-ended request. Just one more year. If it doesn't bear fruit in a year, well then cut it down and replace it. But maybe this tree can be salvaged. After all, if this is a mature tree, just a little

work might induce fruit. The gardener suggests that if he were to dig around the tree and put down some fertilizer, it might come right back. Besides, if you plant a new tree it will take time before it's ready to bear fruit. The owner relents and gives the gardener time to tend to the tree in the hopes that it will produce fruit!

This is a repentance story. It is the story of a second chance. Judgment is still in the picture, but so is mercy and grace.

Which brings me to part three. For the Jewish people in the time of Jesus, the fig tree was a symbol. Sitting under their fig tree was a declaration that they believed that God would bring them peace, safety, and forgiveness, where fear would be a thing of the past. Under one's fig tree was a place where there was no apprehension. It was a realization of God's kingdom on earth if you will.

You see, part three is about another fig tree. The St. Augustine fig tree. A tree that has been under stress lately. A tree that is just not what it used to be these days. It's been nurtured over many years by many, if not hundreds maybe thousands of gardeners and yielded fruit in unexpected ways and quantities, but now going thru a stressful period.

The gardeners seem to be at a crossroad of sorts. Some want to find another plot of land and start fresh. Some think the tree is beyond saving. Then there are the “gospel gardeners”. The gospel reading today calls us to be a gardener of second chances. A gardener who sees the beauty in the fig tree and to see what it is capable of being. Gardeners who have faith that if they cultivate it and nurture it, it can again be fruitful and perhaps in ways they did not realize. To realize that we can sit under that fig tree again and it can be as great a symbol today as it was for the Jew in Jesus’ time. Lent is a time for inner-reflection, prayer, reconciliation, mercy, service, forgiveness and contemplation. It’s also a time to discern whether we are a landowner or a gardener. If we are a gardener, which gardener God is calling us to be? If our God is a God of second chances, shouldn’t we be as well?