

Sermon – March 16 2025

Christ Confronts our Condemnation

Good morning. It is good for disciples of Jesus to gather in this space this morning, to hear the words of Jesus spoken – words of challenge and of nurture. Sometimes when we gather like we do here this morning, it can be easy to forget the foundational link that draws us together as disciples with innumerable disciples throughout the ages who have longed to know, be taught and challenged by, and be healed by God through Jesus Christ. We gather seeking to be transformed by Jesus and do so with special focus during this Lenten season.

As I thought about the theme for today, “Christ confronts our condemnation,” I found myself drawn to imagine the full extent of the scene or setting that acts as the backdrop for our scripture verses today. The scene is defined, as Luke portrays it, by the thousands of people who have gathered in the countryside to listen to Jesus teach. They’ve heard of this teacher who speaks with authority and who proclaims the word of God’s kingdom come in lives of those who by faith change their minds, who repent from old ways of thinking and doing, and walk along a new way of living in a world that is at times chaotic, destructive, and tragic. The people gathered – as we are gathered today – gather because they long to hear the teacher bring truth amid the noisy confusion around them. Picture yourself there. Are you one of the thousands who are straining to get close enough to hear what Jesus is saying to his closest disciples? Are you one of the disciples, at times confused with what Jesus is saying? Are you a skeptic, curious about this teacher named Jesus but uncertain he is really any different than the many who have come before? Are you a crowd member who has made it through with a burning question for Jesus, hoping he’ll have some kind of guidance to help you walk forward in life? Whoever you may identify with, picture yourself there.

While the crowd moves chaotically, and you were feeling claustrophobic (12:1) at first, order has finally come. The crowd has gone silent, and people begin to yell out questions to Jesus:

“Did you hear about the tragedy of the Galileans, about the violence Pilate enacted upon them?”

You are aware of this news headline, and the many other tragedies around you that define your time in history. Brutal and violent wars, both small and large. Political figures who stir up hate and animosity instead of fostering a society of care and support for the most vulnerable. You hear someone else yell out among the crowd about the tragedy of the Galileans: “They had it coming. They provoked the wrath of God.” You notice Jesus listening intently to this back and forth bantering in the crowd. And then someone says, “What do you say, Rabbi?” And Jesus responds: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? “No!” I say to you. But, unless you change your hearts and lives [CEB] likewise you all will perish. Ouch. That one stung. This teacher’s words had some bite. And yet, after the initial sting wore off, you begin to think about these words and how they might be life-giving. In two brief sentences, Jesus had drawn the focus of his disciples, the focus of the crowd, and your focus too, away from condemning others and their faults, and he had re-directed them towards considering what God’s call to change was *for them, for you*.

At that moment, you turned and saw someone nearby weeping. Moved with compassion for them, you place a hand upon their shoulder and said, “Are you ok? What’s wrong?” They respond to you: “I’ve spent too much of my life seeing others through the eyes of their faults...too much time tearing others down, and not enough time seeing their goodness, their potential. This has been my sin.” The weeping person’s demeanor suddenly changes – their face takes on the expression of sudden awareness and then determination, and they push their way

through the crowd to leave. Your impression is they had someone to seek forgiveness from, and a new path to walk.

You turn your attention back to Jesus, who fresh on the heels of his response about the Galilean tragedy, now begins talking about another well-known tragedy that occurred recently in a neighbourhood south of Jerusalem – the collapse of the Tower of Siloam which killed 18 people. You knew of this tragedy well because a relative of yours perished in this terrible incident. Since the day this tragedy occurred, some people blamed the architects for poor workmanship, others the failure of the building’s owner to maintain the structure. Others, again, tried to make sense of the tragedy by providing some kind of theological explanation: it was divine judgment upon those that perished. Jesus speaks and by now, the second time dealing with this type of explanation, you can hear in his voice impatience:

“Do you think that [those who died] were worse offenders than all the others living nearby? No! I say to you, unless you change your hearts and lives, likewise you all will perish.”

Again, Jesus’ words had bite to them, but also their wisdom began to shine through with even greater clarity the second time: condemning others can be a strategy of avoidance – it becomes a defense mechanism against the uncertainties of life and against our own need to change. The loud murmurs throughout the crowd reach a high point until one of Jesus’ disciples yell out:

“Quiet! The teacher has more to say.”

As the crowd quiets down, Jesus begins to tell a story – it’s one of his parables, those down to earth stories that are so familiar and close to home that they draw you right in until that critical moment when the punch hits you and you realize the story is calling you to change in some way.

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard," he began.

You've heard stories like this before. Someone owns farmland or a vineyard or a garden, and he's hoping for a good harvest of crops, fruit, or vegetables. After a short pause and pacing back and forth a bit, almost as if he's deciding how to tell it this time around, Jesus continues the story.

"[The man] came looking for fruit on it and found none."

Oh. Ok. There's the problem in the story. What has been planted has not been producing. Everyone knows now that the man who has planted the fig tree will have to address this problem. What will his reaction be? What approach to the problem will he take? Jesus describes both the man's reaction and his approach to the problem:

"So [the man] said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be using up the soil?'"

The man's approach to the tree is to get rid of it. Its purpose is to bear fruit, and it's not bearing fruit. Is this where the story will end? Will the gardener follow through with this command and uproot this barren fig tree? The crowd waits with bated breath until Jesus continues:

[The Gardener] replied [to the man], 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The murmuring among the crowd begins again, debating the many possible meanings of the parable. You can hear about as many interpretations being given around you as there are people. This is how parables work – it's what makes them so powerful.¹ They can offer differing challenges to people depending on time and context. But in that moment, all those many voices fade into the background as you are drawn to one particular image in this story and that is of the

¹ For a fantastic introduction to parables, see Amy-Jill Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus* (HarperOne, 2014).

gardener, getting down into the dirt, loosening up the soil, adding fertilizer, caring for the root system, and pruning the branches.

For you, there's a contrast between the man and the gardener. The man that wants to cut down the tree is an image, for you, of condemnation and its power to tear down and distract from the possibility of growth and change. The gardener, on the other hand, is an image of compassion and its power to nurture growth where it is lying latent, a possibility waiting to be realized. For the briefest of moments, you make eye contact with Jesus, and you see and feel and sense that nurture in him. His teaching becomes, for you, a clear example of the work of the compassionate gardener who seeks your well-being and growth. While the gardener has dug around, disturbing the hard soil and your root-bound way of thinking and living, he has also freed you to reach deeper and experience new growth. He has given you the gift of time and space – time to change and space to grow. You sense that even if your growth seems painstakingly slow, he will advocate for you again and again, advocating for yet another year of nurture to promote new growth.²

While many in the crowd continue to follow Jesus around after this episode of his teaching, you leave for home that day, contemplating what you've heard and praying that God would help you change and walk in newness of life as Jesus had taught you to. It was days later that you met back up with Jesus when he arrived in your small town, which was several miles away from Jerusalem – Jesus, you had heard, was heading to Jerusalem. Jesus had been at the synagogue in your small town that day and was now teaching a crowd as he walked through town – you ran into the crowd following him on your way to get bread. You overheard some of Jesus' closest Jewish siblings, the Pharisees, telling him to go away. Siblings, as you know well,

² My interpretation of the parable here is influenced by Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso's wonderful children's book on this story called *The Good for Nothing Tree* (Flyaway Books, March 2022).

are often prone to disagreements and fighting like this even if deep down they love each other and belong to the same family.³ The Pharisees told Jesus that he should go away because Herod wanted to kill him. Jesus, while aware of Herod's viciousness, also heard in his sibling's warning their frustration that Jesus was stirring up too much dissention in the cities and towns surrounding Jerusalem.

Watching this all, you suddenly became aware of your own concern for Jesus. He had become for you a nurturing figure and you found yourself agreeing with the Pharisees, whatever their motive: Jesus should stop heading to Jerusalem. Jesus' response to this warning doesn't comfort you:

“Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’”

Hearing this, you are equal parts impressed and disturbed by Jesus' boldness. You had experienced his ministry as a compassionate, nurturing gardener but now you see and hear him especially as a prophet, standing up to predatory leaders. In keeping with this prophetic persona, you hear Jesus continue to speak with great emotion:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”

You are struck, even a bit shocked, by Jesus' words. You know Jesus loves Jerusalem. You know Jesus loves the people of Jerusalem. You know that Jesus faithfully observes pilgrimages to the temple and calls it his “Father's house” (cf. Luke 2:49) But you also know that Jesus, like

³ While the New Testament depiction of the Pharisees is often negative, modern biblical scholarship that situates Jesus and his ministry in its Jewish context has rightfully shown how close Jesus and the Pharisees were in their teachings. This should not be that surprising – after all, it is often within families that we have our strongest disagreements. Christians need to take special care to avoid modern forms of anti-Judaism when foregrounding the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. One way to educate ourselves would be to read more about the Pharisees. For a comprehensive look, see the edited book by Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine called *The Pharisees* (Eerdmans, 2021).

prophets before him, is not afraid to hold the city's leaders accountable and that he does this *because* he loves Jerusalem and its people and desires their well-being. This becomes clear with what Jesus says next:

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Here again is the compassionate one – before a gardener, now a mother hen, seeking to nurture her brood and keep them safe. But just as the gardener would have to work the hard soil and disturb the roots of the failing tree by digging around, so too would the mother hen have to cause a disturbance, vocalizing loudly and calling out to her brood to gather them in, *if* they would be willing to listen. As Jesus spoke the words “I have desired...and you were not willing,” you heard echoes of Jesus’ teaching on repentance from those days before. And in that moment your vocation, the work ahead, became clear to you: in the time that opened up before you, you would seek the nurture of the gardener and the care offered by the mother hen. Would that nurture and care grow in you the fruit of new life and especially the fruit of love and compassion – love and compassion to counteract the condemnation that you seemed to encounter everywhere in your world. *Time...would.... tell.*

As we pull back from dwelling in the space and time of the words of scripture *back then*, we are drawn to see how all along we’ve really been dwelling in the space of God’s word to us *today*. I don’t think it takes much to see the many ways that condemnation tears at the fabric of our own world – whether forms of condemnation are enacted through large scale conflicts and disagreements between nations or through the harmful words uttered against others that originate in the inner recesses of our souls. Condemnation tears down, uproots, and worst of all, refuses to believe that goodness can grow in situations that appear barren. Challenged and nurtured by Jesus’ teaching today, may we know the love and nurture of the God who seeks our flourishing,

not our condemnation. And responding to the love and nurture of God, may we bear the fruits of compassion and love shown to those around us. May it be so. AMEN.