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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
23 March 2025

Sermon on Luke 13:1-9

Worship Theme:

**GOD'S OPEN-DOOR POLICY: ALWAYS PRESENT, ALWAYS PATIENT**

The heavenly Father is always present in the lives of his children. He sees every sorrow we endure. He also sees every sin that we commit. He is always present. Yet, he is also always patient. He assures us that the door back to him remains always open. By giving us room to share our struggles and shortcomings, he works in us the very repentance he desires and saves us from the judgment that would otherwise be ours.

Sermon Theme: "Grace to Keep Growing"

1. Are They More Guilty?
2. We All Need Christ!

Do you think you have God all figured out? When you pray, do you assume you already know how God will respond? Do you look at everything in the world around you and assume you know how God operates, what he thinks, and what he does? It's not hard to fall into that thought, and sooner or later, we all do.

The people of Jesus' day often had that idea too. In Luke ch. 12, Jesus *said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?* [Luke 12:54-56] The people were so intent on visible signs and what they meant that little else mattered. Unless they could see something right in front of their faces, they couldn't figure it out.

Unfortunately, that may have made them good at figuring out weather, but they were very bad at figuring out God. One day when Jesus was teaching, they decided to ask him about a situation to see if he would reach the same conclusion they had. We're told: *There were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"*

What a horrible situation. People had been slaughtered by Pontius Pilate's soldiers while they were bringing sacrifices and offerings to the Lord at the temple. They were so close to the altars where their sacrifices lay that, when their lives were taken, their blood was *mixed with their sacrifices*. We assume there was a reason for what Pilate did, but we aren't told what it was.

That didn't stop people from trying to figure it out though. Perhaps they wondered, "Were these people involved in some anti-government movement?" "Maybe they were plotting against Rome itself!" "Boy they must have been the worst sinners ever – they were killed at the temple itself, while offering sacrifices!!

God must have seen what they did and been burning with anger at them!” So when Jesus asked, “***Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners because they suffered this way***”, the obvious answer based on the visible evidence was, “Yes, that’s exactly what we think!”

To show them how foolish this thinking was, Jesus gave a second example. *Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?* Historical tradition says this tower in Siloam (an area near the south side of Jerusalem) was under construction, so perhaps the people it fell on were helping build or repair it when it fell. By all outward appearances, they weren’t doing anything bad or sinful. They were trying to make the city better and safer!

But the conclusion other people reached was not as gracious. “Did you hear about the people who died when the tower fell?” “Yes, what a tragedy! But they must have had it coming. I mean, these things don’t just happen to people, right?! They must have done some really awful things to deserve such a tragic end!”

What about us though? Do we still have thoughts like this too? News from around the world has never been more accessible than it is now – we hear about almost everything! Do we assume people who are suffering and dying probably deserve it? Do we find ourselves hoping that anyone who inflicts suffering and pain on others gets what’s coming to them from the always present God who sees all and knows all? For example, how would you feel if today we prayed that all thieves, dictators, drug dealers, murderers, and sex offenders would hear about Jesus, repent of their sins, and receive full forgiveness and eternal life in heaven? If we feel shock and outrage more than a heartfelt desire to pray that very prayer, then we still think visible outward deeds are most important. We think good things mean God’s favor and bad things mean God’s judgment, and anyone who sins badly enough is **more guilty** and therefore deserves more judgment!

If we really do think that, then Jesus’ words are just as timely and important for us today too. In response to the examples he gave and in response to whatever other situations we can think of, Jesus redirects our focus by saying, “*I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*” “Instead of getting so worked up about the people killed while offering sacrifices or the people crushed by the tower, why don’t you look at yourself and your own life,” Jesus says. If we think anybody is a worse sinner who is **more guilty**, then we have decided we are not as bad and are therefore not as deserving of wrath or punishment from God. We go to church, we read our Bibles, and we don’t do the “terrible sins” that “those people” do, so we must be better people who are less guilty!

But if that’s true, then why did Jesus come to be the Savior of the whole world? If some people are better and some are worse, we don’t all need the same Savior! So Jesus’ response invites some self-reflection. If God is always present, seeing all, hearing all, knowing all, then there’s no lying to him. We can lie to ourselves and say we’re not as bad as the people we hear about in the news, but just because there isn’t a breaking news story about us doesn’t mean we haven’t sinned. If a camera crew offered to follow you around for a day or two, would you

still feel so confident? But it's even more than that – the Holy God is always present, always here. How quickly then we're led to confess the truth that *all have sinned and fall short* [Ro. 3], and "all" means ALL – even me, even you.

Jesus didn't stop there though. His desire was not that people die in sin, but rather that we repent, turn away from our sinfulness, and be saved! For *God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*. [1 Tim. 2] When an important lesson like this needed to be taught, Jesus often used a picture or a story to teach it. So *Jesus told this 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?'"*

Jesus' parable hits home pretty quickly. When we admit we are all equally guilty sinners who fail to do what God commands, we find ourselves looking in the mirror at a fig tree that isn't bearing fruit. So if we want a God who only looks at visible outward deeds to judge sinners, this vineyard owner would be it: *"I keep looking for fruit on this tree, but it isn't giving me any. Cut it down. Why should it keep wasting the ground?"* We are God's vineyard; he has every right to expect good fruit from us – kind thoughts, peaceful words, helpful actions. And if all he keeps finding is sin instead, he should treat us as we deserve, *cutting us down*.

But he doesn't. And there's a very good reason why, which has nothing to do with us or what we've done. Rather it has everything to do with the Gardener. *"'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it.'"* God the Vineyard Owner has every right to cut us fig trees down when he doesn't find good fruit in our lives. But we're all still here! Why? Because Jesus the Gardener stands between us and that judgment.

You've probably noticed by now that these verses from Luke 13 have a lot of heavy law: "Death exists because of sin, and as long as sin in this world, people will continue to die. How people die doesn't really matter – everyone is a sinner. God has expectations for us, and none of us have kept them and we all deserve punishment outwardly now and forever!" We've been waiting for a sigh of relief in the gospel, and finally Jesus gives it to us: When we're feeling weighed down by sin and desperate for help, staring at a disappointed Vineyard Owner, suddenly our view is obstructed. We no longer see angry eyes ready to cut us down. Instead, all we see is the back of the Gardener, as he looks the Owner in the eyes and stands between us and what we deserve. Before anything can touch us, it has to get through him. We listen to his words and are surprised and relieved to find the Gardener speaking in our defense: "Be patient. Give them more time."

So the Owner does. He gives us more time to learn about him, to receive nourishment and strength from him, and to live in the joy that comes from hearing that all our sins are forgiven and gone because of Jesus. The appointed Verse of the Day for today, 2 Peter 3:9, says, *The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Because of Jesus, God is so patient that he keeps giving us opportunities every day to confess our sins to him, learn

more about him in his Word, cherish the new life and relationship we have with him, and thank him for the **Grace he gives us to Keep Growing**.

God's desire is that we spend eternity living, growing, and thriving in the perfect peace he brings. He freely gives us a new life in Christ, as he daily calls us to repent, turning away from our sins and disobedient lives, and turning toward our Savior in confidence and faith. Jesus Christ alone is able to protect and save and forgive us for time and eternity, which means **We All Need Christ!** God is gracious and patient because he wants countless more people hear his Word, receive the gift of faith in him, and have this new life too. And he has already been doing this for thousands of years! Jesus could have come back only a year or two after he ascended, but God is so much more patient than "*leave it alone for one more year.*" He continues patiently waiting, so that people continue turning back to him. He used people to share the good news of Jesus with you and me, and now he calls us to share that same good news with others! **We All Need Christ**, and we all know someone who doesn't know him yet. There is urgency in our Savior's voice; the world will end, our own lives will end, and time will run out.

But it hasn't yet. Jesus has not come back yet, our lives have not ended yet, and God's patience is not over yet! That means today there is still time. Time to let go of any false security we find in ourselves and our outward visible achievements. Time for all sinners to repent, turning to Jesus Christ for mercy, forgiveness, and grace – things every single person needs! And time to pray for God to graciously continue giving these priceless eternal blessings to countless more people.

As we are strengthened with his **Grace to Keep Growing**, our false security in ourselves and the visible world is crushed by his faithful presence in our lives – God sees all and knows all, which means no one can help and save us better than he can. As important as outward visible parts of our lives are, far more important is the faith he planted within us, faith in a God infinitely beyond our ability to figure out – a God who works in mysterious ways, freely loves the unlovable, and brings us safely to his heavenly paradise forever. And so he is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance [2 Peter 3:9], leaving our sins behind and rejoicing in the forgiveness and new life we have in him. No matter what we face during our time in this world, we have exactly what we need through Christ. Thank you, Jesus, for your priceless, present, patient **grace that keeps us growing with you**. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.