



# *The Westminster Pulpit*

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church  
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

## ***“Jesus sure told you!”*** **Sermon on Luke 13:1-9**

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Third Sunday in Lent

Someone once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

Somewhere in that thought is the definition of repentance. If you want to return to sanity, you need to change your ways! And that does not come easy.

I went to the dermatologist this week and got something cut out of my head. “Have you been wearing a hat with a brim?” “Have you been wearing sunscreen every day?” “Sometimes!” “You need to change your ways.”

I went to the doctor, my blood pressure is still high, and he wants me to lose some weight. Cut out sweets! And I said to him, “There are things worse than dying.” He said, “You need to change your ways.”

How about you? Texting while driving? Too much time on TicTok, “TicToking” the time away? They discovered this thing now called “brain rot.” You need to change your ways.

Do you spend your life keeping up appearances, but behind the curtain, you’re a disaster? Is it time to change your ways? Worried? Fearful? Lack of hope and joy?

The most difficult thing we are called to do is to change.

And yet you’ve responded to the call by coming to worship and putting your life in God’s hands for a change. You’ve decided that instead of having your ears open to the insanity of this world, you’re going to listen to the Word of God for a change.

It’s the way of Jesus!

The Sunday scriptures in Lent have been filled with voices seeking to tempt Jesus into doing the same old, same old. Doing what everyone else is doing.

One of those voices was that of the devil. "Give in, Jesus, and be about you for a change! Be full of yourself. Have star power! Worship the temptation to save yourself at the cost of all others." He told that voice, "No!"

One of those voices tempting Jesus was the voice of the religious establishment. No one is better at tempting Jesus than the religious establishment. Tempting Jesus to be about fine linen. Tempting Jesus to keep his hands clean. Tempting Jesus to keep the temple running smoothly at the cost of the widow's last cent.

Last Sunday, the religious authority said, "You better run! Herod is out to kill you! We will show you the way out of town." But he answered threats with power! "You tell that fox, I'm not afraid of dying, but I don't run from Herod. I run on God's time."

Today, there are voices wondering why some people die way too soon. "Was it something they did wrong? Is that why they died?" He's going to tell them! Listen!

#### *Luke 13:1-9*

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

<sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>So he 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 wasting the soil?' <sup>8</sup>He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Do you understand the irony in this text? The voices asked, "Why did these people die? Were they the worst sinners?"

Do you understand the irony of the text? "No, I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

The irony! Does anyone remember how old Jesus was when he died? There's the irony.

You can almost hear the early church having to field the question, "Did Jesus suffer because he was the worst sinner?"

And the Church had to say, "You know there are things that are worse than dying. When you lose your integrity so that you can survive. When you live for yourself rather than give your life for God or your neighbor, there are things that are worse than dying." "Oh, you can live a very long life, build quite a nest egg." But then God says, "You fool, tonight your very life is required of you and all your things, and now whose will they be?" There are things worse than dying. When you live your life, and it doesn't mean a blessed thing.

Jesus told us... Repent! The way he told us was through a parable.

A parable about a fig tree planted in an orchard. No, a fig tree planted in a vineyard. Why a fig tree in a vineyard? I don't know.

But, in the Bible, the vineyard is used often in allegory. The prophet Isaiah said: "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel. When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?" "Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

Fig trees, too, come up in the Bible; Jeremiah talks about good figs and bad figs, and what he's talking about are the people of Judah. And where did Adam and Eve shop after their first dining experience with the snake? They found their clothes on sale at the fig tree!

The temptation, I think, is to read the parable allegorically. That's how the first-century church read all parables. So, one way to read this parable allegorically would be to say that Israel is the vineyard. Jerusalem the fig tree. The landowner is God, and the gardener is Jesus. That works!

But allegory is in the mind of the beholder; perhaps you have read the allegory this way: that the fig tree is your brother-in-law who does nothing but take up space. And the landowner is your sister, who's ready to divorce. Cut that sucker off at his knees. But your mother says to your sister, "Go to a counselor, and if that doesn't work, then get a divorce." You could hear the parable that way!

You make it fit yourself. Personally, I think of myself as the gardener, and my preaching is the manure. And the congregation is the fig tree! Look, folks, you only have another year!

The trouble with an allegory, you see, is that you can manipulate it how you should see fit. But we go to the allegorical interpretation first as if there's no other way! But surely there's another way!

Think about it this way: let's say I caught you out in the parlor after worship and said, "I have an apple tree planted in my flower garden, and my wife said to me, "Hey, yesterday, I went out to the apple tree to get an apple to make a pie! It's a dud, cut it down." But I said to my wife, "Hold on, dear, it's springtime. There was quite a frost. Killed the buds. Let's give it one more year; I'll do some extra care to cover it next spring...and if it doesn't work, then I'll dig it up." If I told you that little story in the parlor, you would respond with...

“Ok. Did you see that game last night? What time does Duke play?” In other words, you heard it as a story that took up space and didn’t bear much fruit. But I dare say that none of you would answer my little story by saying, “Donovan, don’t you see, your story is an allegory! You need to get a lawyer; Beth has had it with you. You’re just taking up space. She wants out!”

But, if for some unknown reason, you were to remember my little story in the parlor a year and a half from now, you might catch me in the parlor and say, “Did you get any apples?” And I’d say, “What are you talking about?” From your apple tree that Beth wanted to chop down... you were going to give it extra care. Did it work? Did you get any apples?

And I would say, “Oh, yes! Bushel loads, sweet and juicy. I have plenty. Do you want some? I’ve got baskets full in my office.”

You know, I would say that, because you know that there are things worse than dying. That is when you give your life for life. When you give your life in caring and loving. When you give your life, knowing that what is dead can always be raised. When you give your life knowing you don’t give up on anyone. The harvest reaps a thousandfold, forever and ever. Amen!

There are things worse than dying. And that’s living a life that doesn’t mean a thing.

I was down in the cafe on Wednesday, and there was John Arnn. I don’t know how old John Arnn is. Pretty old! When I came here, I would teach Sunday school down in Goodpasture. And he would play the piano!

Not many years ago, John and I worked together to make a musical. But on Wednesday, John said, “I can’t hear the tones anymore.” Can’t play the notes with his hands. So, is he just taking up space? No, he’s written a few novels. He’s down in the cafe drafting another story. He’s writing it with his grandson. It features animals. Animals that can talk.

And John’s eyes twinkle and he smiles that John Arnn smile. And he shares what it’s like to listen to a grandson create a story, a story that will have a wonderful ending.

Because... that’s how stories go when you love and care and give your life. He told you and now you know!

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