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Got Any Good Fruit?

Isaiah 55: 1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Stories came out this week from the Christchurch community about the horrific shooting that happened last weekend. Stories of brave men and women who sacrificed themselves to protect others. Stories of first responders and the politicians who courageously took action to ban the weapons used in the attack. Stories of parents, children, and friends who waited for hours at hospitals to find their loved ones who had been at worship. When they heard news of the attack by text message, one sister and brother drove five hours from the city where they were back to Christchurch, because their father and brother regularly went to prayer services on Friday. When they arrived, they tried to go straight to the Hospital where wounded people had been taken from the two targeted mosques, but they couldn't even get close. So many others had flocked there to try to find their loved ones that the siblings "had to park miles away and ride tandem to the hospital on a Lime rental scooter."¹ When they finally made it, they went from room to room searching, hands sweating and stomachs twisted with dread, holding out hope that they'd find their dad and brother until a doctor came into the waiting room and read a list of patients who were being treated. Halfway down the list, they heard their dad's name... but not their brother's.² And then they knew that he hadn't made it.

It's hard to imagine what it would feel like to be reunited with your family in a situation like this. Like welcoming a soldier home from war, people cry and hold on to each other like they might never let go. It's hard to comprehend how an event like that shakes a community to its core. Tragedy brings what is truly important into focus, making the time you have with those you love that much more precious.

Most of us are knit together by a social contract. We abide by laws, live peaceably with others, protect children and animals, pick up trash, and work for the common good. It's a contract we have to trust every time we leave the house, get into a car, and drop our kids off at school. When the shadow of hate fractures that contract, we feel it – a collective vulnerability. Impossible questions, like *why? Why them? Why not me? What if that happens here?* break into our daily routine.

¹ Graham-McLay, Charlotte, "In Christchurch, One Family Among Many Buries a Son," New York Times, 3/22/19.

² *ibid.*

The blessing and the curse of smartphones, of having the internet in our pockets, means we know almost immediately if a plane has crashed in Ethiopia, or if 1/2 of Nebraskan farms are under water, or a cyclone has swept a massive path of destruction through Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The daily news can provoke similar anxiety: *Why them? Why not us? What if...?*

The events of the gospels can feel so very long ago, but even then people were wrestling with these same questions. The crowd of people following Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem ask him about a horrific event that had dominated their local news – a man-made disaster wrought by the governor, Pontius Pilate, who killed Galileans while they were at worship. This is the first time Pilate appears in the story, so we know when we meet him again in Holy Week that he doesn't seem like the kind of guy to offer pardon to a revolutionary itinerant preacher. Then Jesus names another disaster, a random tragedy where a tower collapsed and killed 18 people. The people want to know: Why did those things happen? Why did those people die? Were those who died more sinful than the rest of us?

The answer is NO, thanks be to GOD. We can't equate tragedy with divine judgment, no matter what the Falwells of the world might preach. Disasters happen: storms come, planes crash, evil is real. Life is fragile, the future uncertain. Jesus doesn't try to explain why. Infuriatingly, he also doesn't condemn Pilate for killing people while they were at worship: Isaiah is right, God's ways are not our ways. When bad things happen, we want to point fingers and hold someone responsible. But God is more gracious than we could ever hope to be. Instead of assigning blame or explaining why, Jesus poses a different question: so— what about you? he asks. What are *you* going to do? And then he tells them what they should do: Repent!

I don't know about you, but for me the word repent brings to mind sackcloth and ashes, the man beating his chest and crying out to God for mercy. An act of confession of all that we have done wrong in our lives. And that's part of it.

But when I was in Seattle for the NEXTChurch conference two weeks ago, I saw a different kind of repentance. A kind of repentance that is closer to the broad vision of repentance we find in the Biblical text. In the Bible, the Hebrew word translated repentance means *to return*; the Greek means something like a change of one's heart or mind, to think and live differently after. To repent is to turn away from the ways of sin and death, and return to God, turning towards the ways of life. Turn away from that which does not satisfy, and turn to the living bread and living water God offers.

In Seattle, I visited a place called the Recovery Café. The Recovery Café is a place where people who are in recovery from addictions of all kinds can find support, and get two meals a day, and other services they need. It was started by two women who were part of Alfred's church in DC, the Church of the Savior, who felt called by God to create a place where people in recovery knew they were loved and belonged. A place where recovering addicts could get a second- or third- or tenth chance at life. When someone shows up and is ready to make a change, they enter the beautiful, brightly painted space. They are offered a free meal. And then they're matched with a small group. The groups meet weekly, so folks can check in and get support, but also be held accountable for their recovery – to share how their recovery is going, what struggles they're having. It's a simple model. But it's one that connects folks with common challenges and enables them to choose life together.

We heard stories of people whose lives were completely barren. They had burned every bridge with their families and friends, they were living on the street or in a car, they had nothing left. The people at the Recovery Café supported them as they got clean and changed their lives, as they turned away from the path that was going to kill them, and turned toward community, and life, and found a chance to thrive again.

The founder of the Café, a woman named Killian, pointed out that most of us are addicted to something. Whether it is to food or technology, drugs and alcohol, work or sex or stuff, we are addicted to whatever we use to numb the pain of daily life. And most of us have felt barren or bereft at one time or another – unable to love or completely unlovable, with little hope for change. Maybe you've had a crisis of faith and been overwhelmed by doubt. Maybe you've been so filled with despair about the world as it is you can't see any point in helping create the world as it should be. Maybe you've come close to giving up completely.

To us, Christ says – repent! Turn from the ways that lead to destruction, turn toward the ways of life.

Scripture reminds us time and again that God is merciful and kind, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The good news for us this day is this image of God as the patient gardener, who sees our barrenness but doesn't cut us down. Instead, God offers another chance for us to bloom – not only giving us time to change, but nurturing the very ground of our being to help us bear good fruit: the fruit of love, compassion, joy, and peace.

God gives us time to repent, time to make the changes in our lives that lead to our flourishing. But make no mistake – life is fragile, the future uncertain. Christ's call to repentance is urgent - The time to change is now.

If you look closely, you might see our church is like a garden... a place where the ground in which we are planted gets fertilized, where our souls are nourished so that together we can grow and flourish and bear good fruit.

And maybe, if you look again, you might see that we are also a recovery café. A place where people are loved and find belonging. A place where we connect to others with common challenges and choose life together. A place where we are strengthened to face our collective vulnerability with courage. A place where we learn to follow the God of life despite the culture of death and destruction that surrounds us. Where together, we repent and turn towards new life. Thanks be to God.