

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2016

**Forward Momentum: Repent & Fertilize**

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1 Corinthians 10:1-33 Luke 13:1-9

This is the third Sunday of Lent and my third message on the theme of “forward Momentum.” Lent is a period of repentance for our sins and the moving forward toward Easter and the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our two scripture readings this morning from 1 Corinthians and Luke are harsh. They are calls for repentance for sins of the past, the distant past and the more recent past.

In the reading from 1 Corinthians Paul enumerates the sins of the Israelites --- idolatry, sexual immorality, putting God to the test, and complaining about all manner of things.

In the Exodus, God struck down the Israelites for these types of sins and Paul is warning the Corinthians that they must repent if they are not to suffer a similar fate. They must learn from the past if they are not to stumble as the Israelites did.

Our Daily Bread (1) said, “... *Paul draws on a somber lesson from Old Testament history. The people Moses led from slavery in Egypt toward freedom in the Promised Land kept turning their backs on God who had delivered them. Idolatry, immorality, and grumbling were among the things that brought them down. Paul points to their collapse as an example to us and sounds this warning: ‘So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful you don’t fall.’*”

The same theme appears in our reading from Luke referring to Galileans who were killed in a brutal police action taken by Pilate in the temple precincts.

Paul asks if those Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans and answers his own question saying that they weren’t but that without repentance others would suffer as they did.

In those days it was generally believed that tragedy was the result of personal sins. In Job 4:7, Eliphaz asks, “*Who being innocent, has ever perished? Where were*

*the upright ever destroyed*” The idea that people are personally responsible for whatever disaster befalls them was the prevalent thinking of the time.

That is hard for us to accept in today’s world. Were the people who suffered in the floods in South Carolina last fall responsible for what happened to them? Were the victims of hurricanes in New Orleans, New York and elsewhere responsible? Were those whose homes were destroyed by forest fires last summer responsible?

In some small way they might have been. The earthen dams which failed in South Carolina might have been built more securely. Homes and businesses might have been built on higher ground to minimize risk of flooding and hurricane damage. Avoiding construction in fire prone areas might also have helped.

Errors of omission and commission may have exacerbated the damage caused by those natural disasters.

Sins are errors of omission and commission and all of us are prone to them. No one is without sin and while we don’t anticipate disaster to befall us for our sins, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “... *God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can endure it.*”

Peterson’s The Message paraphrases the last part of Paul’s statement this way: “*All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he’ll never let you be pushed past your limit; he’ll always be there to help you come through it.*”

Our reading from Luke, after the chilling warning to repent, ends with a parable about fertilizing a non-producing fig tree.

A man wants the fig tree to be cut down but the gardener objects saying, “*Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.*”

In the Old Testament, healthy fig trees are common images for success and prosperity. Their destruction is a symbol of judgment.

In Mark 10:12-14 Jesus cursed a fig tree which was not bearing fruit and it withered and died.

As William Barclay (2) puts it, “*The fig-tree was drawing strength and sustenance from the soil; and in return was producing nothing. That was precisely its sin. In the last*

*analysis, there are two kinds of people in the world --- those who take out more than they put in, and those who put in more than they take out.”*

As I have told you before, I am a lousy gardener. I can't grow much of anything well but I do know that for a lush lawn, a productive vegetable garden, or a beautiful flower bed you must fertilize.

The same is true of maintaining forward momentum toward Easter. We must loosen the soil and pull the weeds of our community, we must repent of our sins, we must fertilize. We must enrich the community in which we live. We must love our neighbor as our self.

Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins but we can't be complacent and say, "No problem! I don't have to worry. I am forgiven." Instead we must repent of our sins and fertilize God's world. We need to reach out to those in need. We need to spread the Gospel and bring it to those who don't know Jesus. We need to do more.

Ask yourself, does this congregation have forward momentum. Are we fertilizing enough? Are we enriching the community for Christ? How can we do more?

**Amen.**

(1) Our Daily Bread, October 5, 2012 (Scripture quote has been changed to NIV)

(2) William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed., The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011