

The Time Is Now
By Frederick Lewis, 3/23/2025

I guess she must have been 9 or 10 years of age. I didn't catch her name. She was playing basketball on one of our church's basketball teams. I saw her as I was walking through the gymnasium. Members of the opposing team were doing a good job guarding her, their arms waving in her face. She passed the ball away, but it was passed back to her again. She looked to her left and then to her right, she pivoted on one foot, trying to find herself a clear pass or shot. No such luck. She hesitated. Then she looked at the basket and attempted to get ready to shoot, but hands and arms were once again waving wildly in front of her. She hesitated again. Finally, in desperation she yelled to the coach, "What should I do? What should I do?" She was so uncertain. The coach came over and put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Listen, you just have to decide and live with the decision." That's not just basketball wisdom, is it? It's also Gospel wisdom. Life being such a delicate and fragile gift, now is the time, really the only time we have. We must decide how we will live it.

In the lesson today, Jesus is passing through an unnamed place on his way towards Jerusalem. Some of those following in the crowd ask Jesus about a calamity that is much in the news. "*How about those poor Galileans? Pilate murdered them and mingled their blood with the sacrifices they brought to the temple.*" A senseless act of violence. Pilgrims on their journey to worship in Jerusalem (no doubt) are tragically killed while offering sacrifice. Innocent people are brutalized. Yet, according to what we know about the habits of Pontius Pilate, it may not have been all that unusual. These people want Jesus to help them make sense of it. Help them figure it all out. No one would have questioned Jesus for a moment, if he would openly have pronounced judgment on Pilate. He was, as they say, a high potential target. Nor would anyone have given it a second thought, if Jesus would have blamed the Galileans themselves. Everyone knew how rambunctious and dangerous some of them had become living under the tyranny of Rome. Everyone knew that Galileans could be a bad sort. And bad things happen to bad people. That's the way it is. Perhaps, they simply got what they deserved.

But Jesus response is "*Nonsense. You don't really think those poor Galileans are any worse than anyone else?*" Then Jesus brings up his own current event. "*What about those people right here in Jerusalem. Those 18 people who died when that tower collapsed on them?*" "*I mean, what did they do to deserve what happened to them?*" Who were they but husbands and wives, sons and daughters of people just like you. They were just standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. In other words, if bad things can happen to saints right here in Jerusalem, just like bad things happened to those rebellious Galileans, then life is not so simple as you thought.

There is an age-old question hanging over this conversation. "How do we make sense of life?" Is it true that bad things only happen to bad people? The crowds certainly wanted to believe so. Oddly enough, so do we. Most people want to believe it because if it's true that people get what they've got coming to them, then it means life is orderly and predictable. I can sort of be in control. And if I keep my nose clean and do the right things and make sure I don't mess up, I'll be OK.

I remember a conversation about someone who had been diagnosed with lung cancer. He was a well-known person and greatly respected. We were all quite upset and saddened to hear the news. And then, someone commented, "*Well, you know he was a smoker.*" And with that comment there came a strange and collective sigh of relief... "Oh, yes." That old logic raised its head. You get what you deserve. But that, of course, is not always how things work. Yes! There are deadly consequences to certain things. But it's just not true that bad things only happen to bad or foolish people. Bad things happen to good people. Terrible things happen to wonderful people.

So what is the point? Life isn't so nice and neat and predictable. It's not just tit for tat. A Transactional kind of existence. Nor are things so much in our control that we can manage everything according to our own liking. Jesus says NO to simplistic answers to complex questions. NO to attempts to solve deep problems with quick fixes. NO to shallow theological thinking. The Gospel truth is, in fact, your life, my life is so extraordinarily fragile and precious. Yet there is a pernicious influence out there... call it evil at work in the world and every one of us is vulnerable.

Jesus' next words do not sound very compassionate. "*Unless you repent,*" he says, "*you, too, will all perish*" "Repent!" Those words fall hard upon our ears. Now I have to say that my journey so far in the Presbyterian world has been a pleasant journey. Not too many unexpectant moments. For 40 years I served Baptist congregations. So, I would be the first to admit I

may not be totally objective. One thing that is a bit different, however, is the Prayer of Confession we share “*before God and one another.*” I mean, I can’t remember publicly confessing sins together in Baptist years. Not that we were without sin. Hardly. But frankly it’s just a little bit awkward, it’s just a little too public, washing your dirty laundry out there in front of everyone. Sins of commission. The things we have done that we should not have done. Sins of omission. Things we have NOT done that we should have done. But then we come to that time of Silent Confession, and I’m left alone to my own thoughts. What do I have to repent of? I confess to being too self-absorbed and consumed. I confess to easily being distracted and focusing on things that in the long run make little difference. I confess to living my own privileged life with often little thought or regard to its impact upon others. In fact, I like to think I am the “captain of our own ship” “master of my own fate” but the reality is life is far more complex.

I was sitting in the church office one day when I received a phone call from a person, I knew who was organizing an effort to help people who were homeless. These were people who had expended their resources, used up their relational capital and found themselves isolated, living in their automobiles, often women with a child or two. They call it “the feminization of poverty.” The suburban homeless as it were whose existence was easy to ignore. The caller wanted to know if our church would help house some of these friends for a month once a year. Provide some stability and support to help them re-establish their lives. Now I was a new pastor. And I could see trouble coming. The church had recently built a new building. Moved to a new location. Everything was fresh and new. Furniture. Classrooms. Carpets. I could already hear the comments. “You want people we don’t know to live in our new building?” “Who are these people and what did we really know about them?” On and on. But I made the fateful mistake of inviting the caller to come to our church and make her case before the congregation and she was passionate. She was convincing. She reminded us of the One who said, “*Just as you did it to the least of these...you did it to me.*” The church had a vote. Not knowing everything that lay ahead, they decided to a risk and do it. I found out something that day. I had underestimated the congregation. I tried not to do that again.

Jesus tells us to repent. But the repentance Jesus is talking about is not groveling self-disdain. On Jesus’ lips repentance simply means a 180-degree turn. The Greek word is *metanoia* which means to turn around. Repentance means to turn away from that carefully guarded and cramped view of life. A kind of cautious view of life that leans towards fear. Repentance is leaning towards God, that great turn towards a life yielded to the grace and mercy and love of God. The great wisdom, the Gospel wisdom is to start to live that life right now.

To illustrate the point, Jesus then tells a story. He tells about a fig tree that bore no fruit and time was running out. The tree had been unproductive for three years and was taking up valuable space and water. The landowner says “*Let’s cut it down.*” But the gardener, that dear and gracious gardener, pleads the fig tree’s case. “*You know maybe, if I dig around and loosen the soil, maybe if we put some fertilizer on it. Maybe, if we give it one more chance, one more year, just one more year.*”

Do you see the point? Life is a fragile and precious gift. We need to start to live life fruitfully now. *Commit ourselves to life today... not tomorrow. Commit ourselves to each other...today, not tomorrow. Commit ourselves to the mission God has given us... today, not tomorrow. Commit ourselves to the Lord of life...today, not tomorrow.* Our temptation, of course, is always to live as if today were a warm-up exercise for real life which is always going to start tomorrow. You know how it goes. I’ll start spending more time with the kids when things slow down at work. I’ll get back to church after I figure this or that out. I’ll give more generously... when the bonus comes in. I’ll serve on that committee when the kids are off to college. I’ll work on the marriage when I’m done with this assignment. The parable of the fig tree, an axe laid against its roots, holds this blunt urgency before us. The time is NOW because, by definition, tomorrow is always LATER.

A few years ago, we received a Christmas card along with one of those intolerably long and tedious letters telling us detail after detail about what had transpired in the lives of those dear people over the course of the last year. The height to which the children had grown. The day camps they attended. The promotion the father had received. The vacation didn’t turn out the way they had expected. The car that died. The blizzard that unexpectedly held them captive. The dog who was now 7 years old. The mother who was frightened by a lump she found on her breast. The daughter who had started dating. Then there was this little handwritten message on the bottom of the letter. “*Life is what happens while you’re making other plans.*” Life is what happens. Life was happening in the midst of all those large and small events.

We will never know with crystal clarity what tomorrow might bring. There is a mystery and fragility to life. Questions will always remain. But that is not an excuse to stand still. Rather we take that shovel and dig around and place the nutrients of love and grace and mercy in the ground and we trust God will be faithful. The poet, Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Time and time again, you and I are pressed to choose: Pressed to take the risk that love always means. Pressed to take the risk that giving and sacrifice always bring. Pressed to choose to follow Christ into all those unlikely places he might lead us. "Listen, you just have to decide and then live with the decision."

I wonder what happened to that fig tree? As for that young girl, she did decide. She made the shot and she sunk it!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.