

### **It's Not (Just) Business; It's Personal**

The closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the more fraught the scenes become as he teaches, heals, confronts religious authorities, and fields questions from the growing crowds. After leaving Martha's house he moves through village after village. In one scene, a woman interrupts him:

'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Jesus wants to make it clear that God's blessing is reserved not for a select few but for everyone who hears *and does* what God expects. Grace abounds, AND God expects that those who know themselves to be saved by this grace will live faithful and obedient lives, lives that reflect the one who saves them. As John preached in the wilderness back in chapter 3, those who hear God's word and repent are expected to bear fruit worthy of repentance. That is how it is supposed to work; that is how the people of God are called to live in God's kingdom-coming world.

Repentance has gotten a bad rap over the years, relegated to billboards on sleepy highways on the way to the beach or on sandwich boards draped over shoulders of wild and wooly street preachers. "Repent!" they shout. "Repent!" they screech. Repentance is wielded like a bludgeon: Do this (whatever this is) or else! Do this (whatever this is) or spend your next life surrounded by flames and scary red figures with horns and pitchforks. I don't think that's what John and Jesus are really talking about when they call people to repent, however. If it's simply about sealing my fate and punching my ticket through pearly gates, why would Jesus spend so much time and so many words

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 11: 27-28, NRSVue

talking about how we are to tend to orphans and widows, how we should care for and care about strangers and friends and enemies, too? That's why, as I have mentioned before, I'm grateful for the way the Common English Bible translates this word. Instead of *repent*, this translation has John and Jesus call people to change their hearts and lives. [Read Luke 13: 1-9, CEB]

In one of my favorite movies, *You've Got Mail*, Meg Ryan plays Kathleen Kelly, the owner of a children's bookstore that had been her mother's. The bookstore is facing overwhelming competition from the arrival of a big box bookstore Fox Books, owned by Joe Fox's family. Joe Fox is of course played by Tom Hanks. Throughout the movie different voices quote *The Godfather* to Kathleen, insisting that Fox Books's running her beloved neighborhood landmark out of business is not personal, it's business. At one point an exasperated Kathleen pushes back on that distinction and responds, "Whatever else anything is, it ought to begin by being personal."<sup>2</sup> *Whatever else anything is, it ought to begin by being personal.*

When we meet Jesus in this morning's text, he has been issuing an urgent invitation to anyone and everyone who will listen to change their hearts and lives. For Jesus, as we found last week, faith is not an abstract concept where one goes through the motions and checks boxes. Nor is it a hobby. Faith is deeply personal, shaping a person and a people at their core. In the midst of these conversations, someone comes to him with breaking news: Pilate, the brutal Roman governor has killed some Galileans while they were in the Temple offering sacrifices. The news is almost too horrific to comprehend. The Temple looms large in their lives—Jesus included—as a place of holiness and sanctuary. The news that this sacred space has been the scene of such a barbarous act is devastating. And it hits close to home. Remember that Jesus has gone with his family to Jerusalem and the Temple

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<sup>2</sup> <https://youtu.be/oWfilYY0h6I?si=RUtZgf68J9jrjApw>

every year for Passover, “according to their custom.”<sup>3</sup> And yet the people respond as many of us do, by deflecting, by making the news an abstract thought exercise, speculating about why those other nameless faceless people suffered or died in such a way.

Jesus has no interest in their deflection game. He pushes them to reflect on whether those Galileans, those neighbors, along with those killed by a tragic accident in Jerusalem were more sinful than any others. And before the crowd can answer, Jesus does. Notice that he does not respond with an easy platitude about these heartbreaking incidents being God’s will or with an oversimplified and unbiblical “everything happens for a reason.” Jesus does not answer the crowd’s speculation about why these things happened. Jesus does not let the crowd distract themselves by blaming the victims, even if indirectly.

So often I am tempted to find a reason, to draw conclusions after a diagnosis, a loss, or an accident as a way of making sense of the nonsensical or insulating myself from the reality that it could have been me. I trick myself into thinking that if I can find a reason, I can then avoid that very thing and prevent the same fate from happening to me. Jesus does not play the distancing game, nor does he let the crowd play that game. Instead, he brings the question home to the ones standing before him. Jesus makes it personal, “Unless *you* change *your* hearts and lives, *you* will die just as they did.”<sup>4</sup> Scholars do not hear Jesus threatening that the crowds will die in the same tragic manner as these people did. He is, however, making it very clear that the crowds are mortal just like those others. Again, Jesus does not let the crowds dodge the question of repentance by pointing to others elsewhere. The question is not about what an abstract *they* did or did not do. The question for the

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:42, CEB

<sup>4</sup> Luke 13:5, CEB, emphasis added

crowds is how they will respond to the call of Jesus here and now. Professor John Carroll sums it up this way:

Jesus seeks the lost and welcomes them into God's household, to be sure, but acceptance of the invitation means transformation of life. And the time for change is the present.<sup>5</sup>

And Jesus understands that change must happen on a personal level, not simply with changed minds, but also with changed hearts and lives. The business of repentance, the business of faith is personal, extremely personal. And, by the grace of God, Jesus reminds us that repentance and faith are not a startup we're left to found or manage alone. To help us understand that he paints a picture of a fig tree planted in an unexpected place.

Some scholars are quick to point out that a fig tree does not belong in a vineyard for a whole host of reasons. And yet, in Jesus' telling of the parable, the gardener has a soft spot for this oddball. When the owner of the vineyard (who is also the owner of the fig tree) starts running out of patience, the gardener intervenes, asking for one more year for the tree to begin producing fruit. He pledges to make the tree his personal project. He will give the tree added attention and nourishment: "Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down." The story is left open-ended; we do not know how it will play out. The gardener understands that there is a clock ticking for the fig tree, and he is personally invested in helping it flourish. With this investment, with this attention, there is still hope, for the fig tree and for us.

The passages that follow this parable speak of Jesus' healing a woman who has been bent over for decades. He lays hands on her and makes her whole. He compares the kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed that grows into an unwieldy, thriving, and invasive plant and to yeast that works its way

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<sup>5</sup> Carroll, 279.

in and through bread dough. The kingdom of God it seems is not a grand, large scale imperial invasion. The kingdom of God springs up on a human level as it unfolds in seeds and bits of yeast, in human lives and human hearts transformed one by one.

This chapter concludes with one more bit of late breaking news, this time from some Pharisees.

[Read Luke 13:31-35]

The conflict has grown even more personal for Jesus. Herod, the Roman-appointed ruler of Galilee is not happy with him and his disruptive kingdom-proclaiming ways. And according to this news flash, Herod wants to bring Jesus' ministry and Jesus himself to an abrupt halt. Jesus first responds by declaring that he has no time for Herod's bullying tactics, he has work to do. Jesus is in the business of saving people. This saving work is what he does and who he is. For him there is no division between business and personal. For Jesus salvation is personal—not private but personal. No one is a nobody in his eyes. He is determined to save and transform every person, and it hurts him to his core every time a person chooses pride, division, cowardice, greed, persecution, cynicism, or ugliness over and against the ways of God's kingdom.

In Luke's telling Jesus does not weep over Jerusalem until chapter 19. He does not wait until then to lament her though. As I mentioned, Jerusalem has a special spot in Jesus' heart. As scholar Richard Swanson reminds us:

Jesus is not like [us]. He is a Jew of the first century, and Jerusalem is, for him, the center of the world. When he says, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem,' he is grieving for a city that he loves.<sup>6</sup>

Jerusalem has a reputation for rejecting and yes, killing God's prophets. And Jesus, who has visited the city year after year to celebrate Passover with his family laments Jerusalem's imminent rejection of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-1331-35-6>

him and the kingdom he is ushering in. He is not in the business of forcing this kingdom on anyone. Instead, he speaks of himself as a mother hen who longs to gather vulnerable chicks under her wings. A hen is of course vulnerable herself, and like Jesus, she would willingly give her life to defend her brood from any number of foxes.

Jesus takes his work personally and the salvation of humanity is his work. No matter how far we scatter, no matter how pitiful or paltry our fruit may be, he has made us his business. He loves us and every other human with every fiber of his being, with every ounce of his person. No threats from a petty dictator or blustering bully will deter him. He will continue his steady walk to Jerusalem, healing people and confronting hypocrites along the way. Soon he will finish his work, giving himself over to the death-dealing ways of the empire by suffering and dying alone on a Roman cross. Ultimately, God will raise him to new life on that first Easter morning to the astonishment of everyone. And all he wants in return is a people who are willing to be transformed, a people who will turn back to him, a people who do their best to live and move and have their being with changed hearts and lives. Jesus longs for changed hearts that find a way to be vulnerable, humble, and open to the other. Jesus calls for changed lives that reflect his generous grace and loving mercy to a world too often duped by the cleverest and most cynical of foxes, changed lives that bear the fruit of love, wisdom, courage, justice, and hope in a barren and embattled world. That is the work of the church, and because of Jesus, that is the business we are in, dear ones. Our business is his business and every last bit of it is personal.

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