

“Chance of a Lifetime”

Sermon – March 23, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Choices and opportunities. Throughout our lives we are given choices. In fact, you can say life is just making one choice after another.

Choosing to help others, choosing to come to church, choosing to watch March Madness.

And there are opportunities that come along our way, maybe a scholarship at a university, a blind date that your friend sets up, or job that takes you across the country.

I have been blessed with many opportunities and on the big ones I’ve scored home runs, like my 40 years of marital bliss.

But one that comes to mind for today is when I was a sophomore in college. I had taken my first year of German, which I had selected in part because my best friend’s family in high school was German and because our fraternity faculty advisor, Herr Dieter Stroinigg, was one of the German professors.

Near the end of the second semester, I had the opportunity that summer to go our university’s branch campus in Luxembourg to study German. It was appealing because in six weeks I could get my entire second year of German out of the way. But I was worried about the expense and the burden on parents. I was the oldest; I had three younger brothers to go to college.

Herr Stroinigg said it was the chance of a lifetime and that I would never regret it. My parents agreed and so I went. And in many ways that I won’t bore you with today, the experience did change my perspective and attitude on life in general and many other ways.

My life would be notably different if I hadn’t had the chance and the opportunity and being able to take advantage of it.

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Today’s lectionary passages also discuss choice and opportunity.

The gospel lesson is a tough one in some ways. People come to Jesus and say, “Look how the Romans cruelly defiled our people! You’re from Galilee! Aren’t you upset?”

It seems the people had the expectation that they were giving Jesus grounds to lead the people of Israel in revolt against Pilate. He did not do that. He says, essentially, “Were these people or others who die in tragic accidents worse sinners than anyone else? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

At first blush this seems a little preachy and little insensitive. Where’s the anger with the government? Where is the criticism of their oppressors? Where is the call to at least protest?

Imagine if you told me, “Look what our government did today to its people!” and I told you, “You better repent.” I doubt that would assuage your anger.

But Jesus is asking us to look at the big picture.

First, when he rhetorically asks, “Were these who suffered worse sinners than others?” it actually an educational moment. In Jesus time—and today, frankly—there was the belief that God’s favor shines on the righteous and the unrighteous suffer.

How many times have we heard extremist preachers blame those who die in a natural disaster for living “immorally”? Or more insidiously, for example, that those who live in poverty that it’s their own fault?

Jesus is saying, “That’s malarky; bad things happen to people sometimes with no warning. They did nothing wrong to deserve it.”

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For people in a culture prone to believe that suffering of any kind is evidence of sin, being reminded that all people sin is vital for understanding communal identity; we are all in this together.

When people believe that suffering is a consequence of sin, they are able to ignore systemic sins and the responsibilities of the many for their own existence. Jesus is not taking a stand against injustice, but he is reminding us that suffering is not evidence of a person’s sin.

Jesus follows up, though, saying, essentially, “Get your own house in order; like those people who died, you never know when your time will come and then it will be too late to make yourself right with God.”

In other words, reflect on your own sins before raging against others because you will be judged before God.

But this is not just individual repentance—it also means repentance from communal corporate sin. It’s about we as a people, as a community, repenting on the systemic sins of our society, those that particularly affect the poor and the oppressed and those on the margins.

The idea of repentance is to turn around and to focus on the kingdom of God and its righteousness. Not just for ourselves but for its possibilities on peace and justice in the midst of these times.

After admonishing the people, Jesus tells a parable about fig tree that was planted but in three years hasn’t borne any fruit so the owner says to the gardener, “Get rid of it; let the soil be used for something worthwhile.” The gardener says, “Let’s give it another year. I’ll nurture it a bit and hopefully it will respond. Otherwise, yeah, we can cut it down.”

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In other words, God will be patient relative to judgment, rather than people perishing right away—but not indefinitely. In the larger scheme of things, God’s grace is greater than God’s judgment.

The gospel ultimately does not proclaim God as a punishing threat to be avoided but as a loving savior to be sought out as the source of true life.

The point of today’s gospel passage is Jesus calling on people to stop procrastinating and to start producing fruits of the Spirit immediately because your life is short, and you don't know when something may happen that will end your life.

Jesus does not promise freedom from calamity, but urges his hearers against false self-assurances. If life's fragility demands urgency, that urgency shows that life itself has carved out opportunity for us to seize God's graciousness, as the parable suggests.

But it’s not something we do out of fear. Repentance refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different perspective.

While we often think of repentance as a sober, contrite act, the Christian outlook on repentance arcs toward joy. And it finds grace experienced within the awful precariousness and strange beauty of our fleeting existence. We rejoice because life is precious and we seek to live it fully as a result.

And to do so we must bear fruit—good fruit. As Paul says in Galatians 5:22-23, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

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Our repentance bears fruit not just for ourselves but for us as a community.

Jesus’ ministry and actions in relation to people is itself a model for repentance. The consequence of when we change, turn ourselves toward God, is that we bear fruit, nourishment to others and by those actions we help others to change as well so that the community changes as well to bear good fruit to one another.

It can be frustrating and you sometimes want to give up on people, but God has not given up on each of us, so how can we give up on others? Like the gardener, let’s try some more nurturing first.

The Apostle Paul also sets a good example.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10, we should imitate Paul as he imitates Jesus by humbling ourselves out of love for others. As Christians we are to engage in love and radical hospitality—joyfully putting ourselves out there for others—because God is faithful.

Today’s gospel passage reminds us that though our sins render us eligible for harsh punishment, God’s work in the world and in our lives extends to us the gift of grace.

Like the tree in the parable, we are often given multiple opportunities to do better, to be better, or to do the right thing. The same grace that God extends to us we must also extend to one another. We sin. We repent. And by the grace of God, we are given another chance to be the people God is calling us to be.

It's the chance of a lifetime—literally—so take it!

In the name of the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.