

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 55:1-9
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
THE GOSPEL: Luke 13:1-9

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019

“Lenten Reflections: Examples”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

What a joy to be able to proclaim the Gospel, the love of Jesus Christ to you. Amen

The good news for today is the word *example*. It is used in the 1 Corinthians text that things happened as examples to us. I wanted to use that word to amplify the good news of God’s love to you and to me. Examples – perhaps you have people in your life that have been examples for you. The word example is able to take something out. Ex – take something out, ample – is to take something out of each experience. I think as lifelong learners, as disciples of Christ, that there are circumstances in which we can take things out of. But it’s important not to put things into situations that we may not know so much about.

The Gospel text speaks of this. It is a rather obscure story, at least as my studies have been, this line that the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. It appears that Pilate was raising funds for some civic improvements there and as the Roman representative, he took money from the treasury of the church. People were of course upset and how ridiculous and horrific that was. They protested, and in those protests some were killed as Pilate had assassins within them and took many of them and made them dead through stabbing. So that’s what this metaphor is. That’s simply an atrocity when power is used in such horrible ways. We have examples of that, New Zealand itself where power of a weapon was used to wipe out 50 Muslim worshipers. Were they worse than any others? Of course the answer is no. The atrocity for us is that, use it not as an example of what they received but as an example for you and I living as people of faith as best as we can to honor God by promoting peace and justice throughout the world.

Then he mentions this tower in Siloam and that is where there was an accident and the tower fell, probably an aquaduct tower, and it fell and killed 18 people. Jesus asked, “Do you think that they were worse people than others?” And the answer of course is no. But often we use examples, we place into the example our own thoughts and feelings. Jesus had this line there, “No, these people are no worse, that’s an accident.”

There was a little bit of humor but it was dark humor for me. Coming from Nebraska the flooding is just beyond scale and scope, very difficult. It’s kind of guy humor but some of the guys were teasing me, “Well God must be smiting Nebraska. Must have been some bad people

up there.” It’s kind of that joshing but isn’t it interesting when God gives us examples, we put in our own thoughts. That’s where the Gospel reaches out to us, which is “No, unless you repent, you all perish just as they did.” I want you to be secure in your salvation, this is not the high rope test that if you make a single mistake you are going to die. This is an encouragement for you and I to understand that it is God’s perspective we are seeking. God’s perspective in repentance is that word. Repent means to turn around, repent means to change your mind. Repent means to come into a living relationship with God.

Certainly the scriptures are an example for us, that we can take so many good things out of God’s word. The Isaiah text says it this way, “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near, let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them and our God for he will abundantly pardon.” Then it is amplified this way. This loving God, ever pursuing us out of love, for God’s thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways says the Lord. This is a constant reminder for you and I to repent, to turn.

Luther said it this way, “Life is an act of daily repentance.” I encourage you during this Lenten season, when you take time to reflect upon the love of God, and reflect that love to others, is not to choose to view repentance as a last ditch effort to save yourself, but as a continual relationship with Christ, to be able to reach out to Christ’s love, to do this on a daily basis. As Pastor Garvey announced, as a called and ordained minister, this incredible message, the forgiveness of all of our sins. Remember, it’s because of what Christ has done. One hundred percent outside of our work, 100 percent the work of God. So that confidence that you and I have, comes to repent, not to save our own, but to be able to take God’s perspective of love, peace and mercy. So neither an atrocity or accident, let’s not put in our judgment, let’s put in God’s judgment, which is to call us into alignment in love for God and for each other.

I want to encourage you about this parable. Parables are fantastic, they are stories that don’t directly have a message, you have to be able to discern. So this fig tree planted in a vineyard was not producing. The owner wants to cut it down, why should it be wasting the soil? The gardener comes forth and says, “Don’t do it yet.” I have heard this preached which is “that’s an angry God who is ready to wipe you out unless you get it together”. But you see the word of man, that’s not God. I can take it that Jesus might be the gardener, but I am going to use the example that God has given us, this parable is the Holy Spirit. Here is a tree. This is a little test question. What’s the fruit of a fig tree? “Figs.” Right? The technical answer is the full fruit of a fig tree is another fig tree. I have heard that before, I like that. So for you and I, the fruit of our faith, is another person that we have introduced the faith to.

I have come up with a mathematical formula. It’s pretty complex, see if you can hang with me. It is such a joy to be with you today as a full service, but we have plenty of room for plenty of people. I figured this out, that if each one of you invites one friend to worship, we

will double the size of our worshipping congregation. I can go back over that... (laughter). That's an example that Christ sets for us, to bring people into this alignment, to hear the good news of God's love. But this parable reminds us of what it's like. You take a fig tree, what's the problem? I've shared that I'm trying to figure out how to grow grapefruit and oranges and it has something to do with fertilizer and there is something to do with water. I'm still a little confused, but the fragrance that God is bringing from the flowers gives me hope that it will be a good season coming up. This is you and I, isn't it? That this issue of the Holy Spirit digging around the soil, you know that if soil gets compacted you need to cultivate it, you need to get it so it can receive the minerals.

The word manure here of course is the fertilizer that with its organic materials allows growth of a tree. That's our life. The Holy Spirit needs to come into my life for sure and to change some of my old habits, the ways that I perceive life, the judgment that I have on others, the ways that when accidents or atrocities come that I put my judgment instead of God's judgment. I need the Holy Spirit to change my soil, to change the ways that I have been acting, dig around, allow it to receive. The fertilizer itself – these practices of the church with my young friends here, as young people you have lots of options for your faith, but for me as an older pastor, I just encourage you that what we have here in the life of faith is based upon tried and true ways to strengthen our faith and our love of Jesus Christ. The daily repentance to turn to the Lord is just a good practice to stay connected with God instead of distancing. If there has been one step off the path in your action, just take one step back on, you don't need to wander. Although if you do, you know that God is merciful and gracious and wants you to come back into a living loving relationship, because he gave everything for that through his son. These acts of repentance, to pray and to invite others, to give, to serve, to study, to encourage in worship. We call them avenues of faith. It's God's way of providing the fertilizer of life, these relational aspects for you and I.

I always find it funny in this sermon when I try to give this advice. These are good things for your life. But it may come off as the law. Pastors laying on the law. He tells me to pray. He tells me to invite people. He tells me to be generous. He tells me to serve. He tells me to study. He tells me to encourage others. He tells me to come to worship. I don't like that, so I share a quick little example. I say it to you because there are ways that God fertilizes our life, allows for there to be growth. I want to end with this silly story.

I just want to be clear to you that I had valley fever that has been eradicated, isn't that good news? Now the doctors are working on my weight. We are all in this together, that's all I have to say. So, 42 pounds, okay? You heard it here, 42 pounds, and after a week of working on it, it appears to be still 42 pounds. My pulmonologist is really actually excited in some ways, I don't know if he thought the treatment would work because it was kind of weird what I had, it wasn't really showing up right, but it was great, the medicine I had to take. He said, "what do you like to do for physical enjoyment?" I said, "I like to swim." I really am enjoying

that, coming from Nebraska, swimming down here. He said, "How far do you go?" I said, thinking kind of proudly, "2 miles a week." Got kind of a little swagger. He looked at me, up and down, he says, "Make it 3." So next time I went, the next day, I was mad. I got in the water and said, "this doctor has taken something that I enjoy and made it into a prescription, doggone that doctor." Back and forth, remember, not Michael Phelps, more like a barge going up the Mississippi, as I am going back and forth. I thought I would just share that with you, which is "Get over it Lowell." Because I had forgotten what he had said at the end. This is the example he was giving me. He said, "You are going to live to be 100. You got through this and now we need to keep you healthy. We need to keep you alive. These years you put in your 60's will pay tremendous benefit." He was doing it out of love and encouragement and I took it all the wrong ways.

That's the way we have for our faith life. So when you hear of God's examples, of God's encouragement for you, to disrupt the patterns that you may have, the habits that are disruptive. When it says that if it bears fruit next year well and good, but if not you can cut it down. That's just a story to say that God will remove those things that separate you from his love because he loves you that much. When you hear these encouragements, don't take them as judgment, take them as examples. These are the well-formed examples of faith life, to pray, invite, give, serve, to study, encourage and worship. These are the fertilizers that God gives us for faith. I give thanks to God for these examples. Be encouraged. Amen