



'Time for Grace'

Third Sunday in Lent
8:30 & 10:45 am, Sunday, February 28, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Isaiah 55:1-9](#); [1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#); [Luke 13:1-9](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Years ago, I bought my parents a lilac bush for their front yard, having fond memories of the huge, fragrant lilac bush beside my grandmother's front porch. I eagerly helped my mother plant it, and with all that we did that first year, I was certain we would have a flourishing lilac bush in no time.

Well, it didn't bloom at all the first two years. Mom thought it had too much shade, so it was moved to a sunnier spot. That next year she saw a few leaves, but no blooms. Another summer went by, and a bad afternoon thunderstorm laid waste to a major branch. After a fourth year of pretty much nothing, we were tempted to get rid of it. But my mom decided to spend a little more time—one more year—with that lilac bush, patiently caring for it, hoping her nurture would yield precious blossoms. I am so glad she did, for 30 years later, it still blooms.

My mother was like the gardener in the parable Jesus tells—the gardener who takes care of a fig tree in the vineyard he tends. Like him, she established a grace period—an allotment of extra time to permit productivity. In Jesus' story, a vineyard owner had a fig tree, and went out to see whether it bore any fruit. It had not—for three years, in fact—and the man wanted the tree cut down to allow the space and resources it was taking up to be put to better use. But the gardener persuades him with these words: "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

A grace period, an allotment of time for productivity. The gardener offers the fig tree another chance. He will dig around it, spread fertilizer to nourish it, lavish his attention upon it, in order for it to bear fruit. One more year, he says. This one year will be the tree's time for grace.

Jesus tells this parable in response to those who are discussing a tragic current event. People are theorizing the why and wherefore of it—whether other folks' sinfulness resulted in the tragedy experienced. We have no other writings about this event where Jews visiting Jerusalem apparently were slaughtered. But considering other stories exist about the brutality of Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, we shouldn't at all be surprised that there might have been innocent blood shed in Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman Empire. People following Jesus are trying to make sense of this event—as you and I often

try to make sense of tragic events in our time. In this case, they wonder whether the victims were sinful, and that their being bad resulted in bad things happening to them.

Well, Jesus considered such discussion a waste of time. Precious time when the people asking those questions could instead be about the task of their own faithful living. He turns the discussion from those **other** folks to the gossiping folks themselves and says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Jesus says there is a limit for us. There is an end, and a judgment, which all of us face. And there is also a certain period of time before that end which offers each of us an opportunity to be faithful and productive, to grow and bear good fruit for the sake of God and his world. The Church, particularly during the season of Lent, speaks of both our limit and this time for grace. Those of you familiar with older Lutheran liturgies might even recall one of the absolutions offered in the old red hymnal. The pastor would say these words after confession: *The almighty and merciful God grant unto you, being penitent, pardon and remission of all your sins, time for the amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of his Holy Spirit.*

Time for the amendment of life. A grace period in which you and I can respond to the tender nurturing of God, to the loving care our Lord lavishes on us every day. Time for the amendment of life—because in our lives we've not always been productive. We've not used God's gifts wisely. This is what we need—one more chance to bear good fruit. That time for grace can make all the difference.

Mark was an alcoholic. His wife and daughter were at their wit's end, not knowing what else to do. They pleaded with him to admit his problem. They worried when he stayed out all night, and only wearily rested when he returned in a drunken stupor in the wee hours of the morning. One day his wife Lois told him, "I will leave you, and I will take our daughter with me, if you do not begin to change now. I'll help you. I'll support you. But I swear this is your last chance." Mark looked into her eyes, and he knew she meant all of it. She was giving him time to amend his life...one more chance.

Jim was a **WORKaholic**, rarely taking a vacation. His family became accustomed to his being busy with his career 24/7. For years Jim and his wife Mary talked about a vacation, maybe buying a little motorboat and tooling around a nearby lake. But that's all it was—just talk—and then "vacation" would be shelved for another year. Until Mary discovered a lump in her breast, and Jim and Mary realized there might not be other years.

Helen, even into her early '70's, was treated like a princess by her husband, who did everything for her. Not just maintenance on the car, and lawn care and so on. He also handled the bulk of the cooking, the laundry, and the other housework while she laid down because she had aches and pains and this and that and didn't feel particularly perky some days. He was very kind and tolerant. But he died first, and suddenly the little princess had no one to tend to her. Her adult children were supportive, but couldn't replace their father. The house needed cleaning, laundry done, bills paid, groceries bought. Slowly, Helen learned how to do those things, but once the chores were

accomplished she laid back down on her couch, and noticed the silence of the house.

Luke, in recounting Jesus' parable, is announcing to the Church that you and I have time for grace in our lives. God sent Jesus to us to nurture us along, to teach us his way, and patiently lead us. In order that you and I might be changed, and turn from those things that are unproductive and sometimes downright destructive, and turn instead to the active, fruit-bearing life of being in Christ. Jesus steps into the midst of our human failures and takes on the burdensome work of tending to us. He nourishes us with his fertile word. He waters us in baptism with forgiveness and the power of the Spirit. He feeds us with his own self, his gift of body and blood. He gives us precious time to amend our lives, bringing them in line with his.

And such amendment can happen. The stories I tell you are true—these are stories of friends I have known.

Mark, faced with his grace period, used that precious time and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. He battled that disease, and his family stood by him in those battles. That time for grace found him bearing fruit. In fact, eventually, Mark became a seminary classmate of mine, and was ordained a pastor, ministering to a congregation, his family at his side.

Mary had her cancerous breast removed, needed repeated sessions of chemo, and eventually became a cancer survivor. While that was happening, Jim began to take days off, and they bought a little boat. On days as she recovered, and in the years that followed, you would often find them riding along on Raystown Lake, fishing a little, talking a lot, spending precious time together.

And Helen? She finally realized there was this grace period before her. Someone at church asked her to become a nursery attendant, and she actually got down on the floor, playing with those energetic toddlers. She offered to launder the altar cloths each week, lovingly ironing and folding them. Then a fellow parishioner invited her to the local senior center. I think they created a monster! She became a leader at the senior center, even directing its band, which consisted of a piano, two trumpets, a drum set, and a kazoo (Helen played the kazoo and danced at the same time—a real feat for a Lutheran!). And Helen, who had once been the world's great hypochondriac, now took under her wing those at the center who were apt to launch into lengthy discussions about their aches and pains, doctor appointments and medicines. In a most tender manner, she would smoothly navigate them to other activities. The grace period of time on Helen's hands had opened her blossoms.

Jesus calls us all to self-examination, to recognize the limits in our lives, and the deadwood we often carry. He is looking for buds to appear on our branches. He offers us time for grace through his presence among us now. And he offers us his patience and nurturing and power to see us through to Springtime. **AMEN.**

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