

**"Three Little Words"**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**Luke 13:1-9, Series C**  
**March 7, 2010**

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN  
The text for this morning's message is the Gospel lesson which was just read.

One of my favorite activities during the long Wisconsin winters of my youth was watching old movies on TV. Whether they were dramas, comedies, westerns or gangster movies I enjoyed them all. Mike, who has always had 2 or 3 jobs delivered pizzas as one of them while he was in college. At the end of the night he would bring a pizza home and while he ate all the inside pieces I would fill him in on the plot. He preferred murder mysteries but on occasion we'd be stuck with a musical. The one today's text brought to mind starred Debbie Reynolds and had the intriguing title, Three Little Words. Do you know what those 3 little words were? "I Love You!" of course. They are, perhaps, the most powerful and misused words in the English language.

The Gospel includes has 3 little words, too that are no less powerful. They are the words of the owner of the vineyard concerning his unproductive fig tree: "Cut it down!" – as sad as the saddest words in Scripture, "Depart from Me."

Words of judgment are never comfortable words to hear especially from God, who is the owner of the vineyard in this parable while the vinedresser is Jesus, and the fig tree is Israel – which is not to say we aren't included.

The owner is looking at a tree He has chosen and cared for over a number of years. Three years was long enough for any fig tree to produce at least some fruit. Fig trees bear several times a year in the Middle East and should always have some indication of fruit on them: either buds, green fruit or ripening. Still, after all that time of tender care in a fertile spot the owner is seeing no results.

Ah, the poor fig tree - poor Israel. Chosen by God from all the nations of the world and showered with special love and care they still have not produced the fruit of righteousness that God desired from them. They had not been a light to the nations as they'd been instructed. They had not turned their own hearts, much less the hearts of the world, back to God. Their mission had not been accomplished.

God's great love and care, His patience and mercy had been visible to all who watched His dealings with them. Time after time they had gone searching after other gods - like a tree growing warped and crooked, and time after time God had rebuked them, encouraged good growth, forgiven their sins and heard their cries for mercy.

Still, they bore no fruit. Though they'd seen God's miracles and heard God's prophets. Though they'd eaten His heavenly food in the wilderness and experienced His mighty

deliverance in battle as they occupied the Promised Land He'd given them. And so the three words of judgment are spoken: "Cut it down!" No production = termination.

No wonder people are afraid of God. This judgment is harsh. But is it fair? Yes, of course, it must be just because God embodies justice. He is all that is just and right and there is no justice outside of Him. But where does this leave you and me? Aren't we all like Israel in our own way? Don't we turn from God instead of to Him? Don't we fail to tell others about Him? Don't we make His work the last of our priorities? Aren't we forgetful, at times, in our thanks to Him for His goodness and blessings? Haven't there been times in our lives when we have gone seeking after other gods, after money, or power, or security, or whatever it is that our neighbor has that we want?

Aren't there times when we're all a little bit like Pinnochio - who resisted the love and concern of his creator Gepetto, didn't listen to his conscience, Jimminy Crickett and went off and got into terrible trouble? Did you know that before Walt Disney made it a story of triumph it was a tragedy? In the original story Pinnochio dies. It was written as a parable: the puppet's resistance to the love of his father, his willful turning away from responsibility and his failure to listen to his conscience that leads to him just being a piece of kindling not a kid.

His would be our story. His could be our story, but we were not abandoned by God. We were not left to pay the price for our willful deeds. Instead the price was paid for us by Jesus, the vinedresser in our story, who enters the parable to show us another of the qualities God personifies: loving mercy.

The vinedresser pleads for one more chance for the unproductive tree. He will dig around it and give the roots room to grow. He will fertilize it and give it all the nutrients it needs to be productive.

Loving tender care - that is what the Lord gives to us His children. He encourages us to grow, to blossom, and to be productive. He comes that we might have life - abundant life - and we do have that life in Him. God desires all of us to live a life of forgiveness, peace, and restoration. God wants each of you today to have a life of power and strength - a life filled with growth.

But growth isn't always easy, is it? Change Theory, is built on the premise that people generally will not change any behavior unless the pain of not changing is too great to bear. Who signs up for the pain of change for new limitations that come from age or illness? When such things happen - and they are inevitable in this world marred by sin there is the temptation to stand back and judge those who suffer, wondering just what they did to deserve their particular pain.

The group of men in our Gospel who came up to Jesus were searching for a reason, a meaning for death of those who had been killed by the Romans in Galilee and had their blood mixed with the temple sacrifices. Jesus told them, "No, there was nothing particularly bad or extra sinful about them" nor the victims of a great tragedy of their day - those who had died when a tower collapsed on them

That was not what they wanted to hear – not what any of us want to hear but, the reality is, bad things happen do happen to good people - to God's people as well and they are painful, challenging ways for us to grow. Bad things happen to good people - to people who pray and have their prayers answered, to parents who wait and worry, who give their lives and their children to the Lord. Bad things happen to good people, to God's people and they are opportunities that can take us more deeply into God's Word and draw us closer to Him in prayer as we seek comfort, guidance, and strength to deal with the task of living as Christians in a sinful, fallen world. They are also opportunities to turn to the Lord in repentance.

Repentance - a change that affects all of our character and life as we turn from those things that would destroy us to new life and faith in His love for us.

Jesus, the vinedresser who pleads for the life of the tree is the one who laid His life down so that all could be saved. He was willing to die and suffer beyond any comparison so that you could live. He understands all that you have gone through, all that you are facing now, everything that will come in the future and Jesus still earnestly desires that NO ONE - NOT ONE - SHOULD BE LOST.

Do you hear the real words behind this call to growth, this call to repentance? Do you hear God's message to all in this parable? You can sum it up in 3 little words, "I love you!" followed by 3 more words "turn to me" and completed with 3 words of welcome for those who do, "You are Mine!"

For those who repent, who turn to the Lord our God who is gracious and merciful, He promises that He will not let you perish, that He will dry every tear from your eye. God promises to work every situation in your life out for your good, that every struggle you have will have a purpose and meaning even if it isn't apparent immediately or ever in this lifetime.

This call to repentance is also a call to action for Christians. In word and deed in love and in meaningful action we have the privilege to share with others the message of God's good news, to speak of the hope that lies within us before the final judgment comes. The common interpretation of today's parable concludes that the tree never did produce fruit and that it was chopped down. The understanding is that this happened when Jerusalem fell in 70 AD and the temple was destroyed. But I contend this is not a parable that ends - it goes on and on. Many are still lost – people you see every day – the college student delivering your pizza, people clinging to false faiths of self-improvement or false Gospels: Mormons, Muslims, B'hais, Hindus, Buddhists, if you want to label groups but more importantly the people down the block from you or people in your own home. People you know in need of an eternity changing encounter with the immeasurable love of God.

3 little words: "I love You!" God is saying those words to you today. Listen to them. Heed them. Turn to God in faith and then tell all that will listen that God loves them, too!

AMEN