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Once again, the Revised Common Lectionary doesn't do us any favors today. This is some of the hardest text to hear, even during Lent, but it's made even harder by separating it from the passages before it.

In Luke's chapter 12, which we DIDN'T hear last week, sadly, Jesus speaks in pretty harsh terms to the people of Galilee about repentance. He ends by berating his listeners for being able to predict the weather, but not being able to interpret the signs that judgment is nearly upon them. Pretty hard words for his enemies, much less his followers.

Chapter 13 begins with the Galileans, not surprisingly, reacting defensively to Jesus' words. They ask him about some Galileans who were horribly killed in Jerusalem, and it's clear from Jesus' answer that his audience was expecting, or at least hoping, that he would say that those Galileans had died because they were worse sinners than the ones asking were. Not only does he NOT say this, he goes on to say if they don't repent that they would die in the same way.

Then to further make his point, Jesus talks about the eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam falls on them. Once again, these people were not worse sinners than his current listeners were, and once again he tells them that if they didn't straighten up they would die in the same way.

It would be wrong to focus on the deaths, or the means of death here, because to do that confuses Jesus' message. Jesus is not saying that if his listeners don't repent that Pilate will kill them or that a building will fall on them. And he's certainly not saying that their level of sinfulness has determined or will determine their deaths, although that was the prevailing thought among the Jewish people at that time. The important thing that Jesus focuses on here is the need for repentance. So since this IS Lent, let us focus on repentance, too.

The Greek word for repentance everywhere in the New Testament is *metanoia*. This is a compound word that means to change one's mind. But not in the sense that you order a hamburger at a restaurant, then change your mind and order chili. This is literally to change your mind, so that it's not the same as it was before.

Repentance is one of those churchy words that has lost some of its power over the years, and as such most people feel it can safely be ignored. When we hear the word repent, I at least think of wild-eyed evangelists on the street corner or in the subway. Michael used to joke that if you wanted a seat on the subway in Boston at rush hour all you had to do was fold a sheet of paper in thirds and shout, "Repent!" and the crowds would part like the Red Sea.

Some people think of repentance in terms of being sorry for something you've done, or for the way you've lived your life. It IS that, but it's also so much more. Repent is a real action verb, a verb of continuous change, of transformation. And Jesus, in this passage, makes it clear that it can't be safely ignored.

So how do we go about changing, about transforming our minds? The first thing we need to do in order to repent is to know ourselves really well. We need to examine every part of our lives. This involves looking at our actions and our reactions, our emotions and our motivations. Everything. We need to shine a spotlight in all the dark corners and not be afraid to look where there might be spiders.

This self-examination can take many forms. Ignatius of Loyola came up with a series of prayer exercises that are specifically for examining our lives. Centering prayer or meditation can also be helpful. Journaling is always a good idea, though I'm a rotten journalist, myself. I love to buy journals, wherein I write, "This time I'm going to write in this thing every day, for sure," on the first page, and then run out of steam.

Some people find help in therapy. For others, confession, or what we call in the Episcopal Church the Sacrament of Reconciliation, can be very helpful and freeing. Whatever we do, this self-examination is a real act of faith – faith that God loves all of us, not just the shiny, Sunday person we bring to church.

Though this self-examination is, and should be, an ongoing process, the next step in repentance needs to happen sometime. Now that we've examined our lives, we need to determine what needs to change, and how to change it.

Some things are obvious, of course – stop getting wasted, stop cheating on a spouse or on taxes, stop shoplifting, stop any number of things that are obviously immoral or illegal. Those are the low hanging fruit and those are behaviors that can't continue if we are trying to have real repentance. But I would be willing to bet the farm that we wouldn't find many of those kinds of infractions in this room.

So we have to go deeper than that. The things we really have to change are much subtler than crime or cheating, and often they are things we need to START doing rather than STOP doing.

Do we really love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind? Do we really give God the first fruits of our labors? Or our time? Or our attention?

Do we REALLY love our neighbors as ourselves, with all the messiness that that entails? Do we really forgive others as we would like to be forgiven? Do we really love and forgive ourselves?

Are we really willing to follow Christ all the way to the Cross?

~~Pause~~

And then there's that fig tree. It's not an accident that Jesus' parable of the fig tree comes on the heels of his difficult words about judgment and repentance. At first it seems like a harsh story – the fig tree hasn't produced fruit in what doesn't seem like that long a time and so it's headed for the woodpile.

As an aside, I love Google! Once I wrote that last sentence down, I had to know exactly how long it takes before a fig tree will bear fruit. The answer is three to five years, so the owner wanting to chop down the fig tree in just three years is kind of jumping the gun.

But wait, says the wise gardener. Spare it for one more year. I will tend it carefully, and if it still doesn't give you any figs after that time, chop chop!

If we take it for granted that this parable has something to do with what went before, it's pretty easy to figure out. We are the tree, God in his judgment is the owner, and Jesus is the wise gardener who steps in to save the tree from becoming firewood.

There are a couple of things in this story that are worth mentioning specially. One is that fig trees are often used to symbolize Israel, meaning the parable's message could be directed to all of the Jews as a nation. The other is that manure can symbolize humility, as well as a medium to encourage growth.

So this story, as most parables do, can have many layers of meaning. It can be Jesus pleading with the Father to save each of us individually. Or it can be that we've been given a second chance to grow and produce, but the time may be limited and we should seize it right away. Or it could be that this message is directed at the Church, just as it was directed at Israel, to start listening to the Word of God and repenting.

But all of the meanings involve repentance, or humbly examining our lives, changing our minds, and doing things differently; and they all involve God's mercy in giving us a second chance.

Take that second chance! Every day, every hour, every minute. Repent and turn back to God, and you will be showered with God's merciful grace through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And you will bear fruit.