

“Turning Back to the Lord” based on Luke 13:1-9, Isaiah 55:1-9

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 23, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

As many of you likely already know, I absolutely love the Foothills Farmer’s Market. It’s not just that I enjoy the opportunity to buy local products, but I love that I get to talk with the vendors and my fellow shoppers. When I’m there, I feel like I’m part of a community of friends.

Yesterday, I had Josephine with me, and we had a great time. She had her hot chocolate, and I had my Ethiopian coffee – which is new and wonderful from my friends at Firebeard Roasters. I think they carry the Ethiopian mostly because I keep pushing them for it. Then we ended our morning talking with Duncan, and adding yet another bottle to my and my son Harrison’s expansive hot sauce collection.

It’s a place where I trust my kids to explore the shops, go to the Pop token station, and test their freedom, as many of the vendors know me, and they know my kids. What’s interesting though is that I think I stick out a little bit in this community.

You see, whenever someone else is there who is not from the South, immediately, someone will introduce them to me. I was immediately brought to meet the new bagel baker who is from New Jersey. I was introduced to a lovely couple previously lived in New York City. I even got introduced to someone I already knew because I met her when I first moved to Watertown and I worked with and became friends with her parents when she was just nine years old – Harrison’s age. Now, she’s a full-fledged adult. I’m old.

That one was fun, because I think it reinforced the assumption behind these introductions. We, as human beings, have a natural tendency to categorize and classify people. We assume two people in the same group may already know each other, or at least, that they will have something in common and want to get to know each other. My accent – or lack thereof – gives me away every time, but it’s worked out well for me so far.

In our passage today from Luke’s gospel, this type of dynamic is at play. Jesus was from Nazareth, a town in the region of Galilee about 90 miles from Jerusalem. With cars today, we may not think that it’s very far, but on foot, that’s about 30+ hours of walking. It would take several days to make this trip. Most of Jesus’s disciples are from Galilee as well, and since Galilee was part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, there was a distinct accent that Judeans made fun of. At Jesus’s crucifixion, when Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest, they say, “You’re accent is Galilean and you must be with that Galilean Jesus.” But then Peter denies knowing him.

What’s more, for the Judeans, the people of Galilee were not considered properly religious. They may not have been true “Jews.” They lived so far from the temple and the influence of Greek culture was prevalent there. The Galileans, though, saw themselves as Israelites who shared the same faith as their Judean siblings, but they had a reputation as outsiders, and were often labeled as troublemakers. Now, Jesus and his band of followers are being seen in this light.

Jesus is proclaiming a message of the Kingdom of God. He’s bringing this message from the region of Galilee. He’s not starting in Jerusalem. This message is going out to all people, even the Gentiles, the nations, and even the Samaritans, and not from the Temple.

The paradox of Jesus and this message is that it is precisely its inclusive nature – his going out to others – that makes him a source of division. We saw this when he preached his first sermon in Nazareth. At that time, Jesus pointed to God’s love for the pagans, the Gentiles, the people of the nations, and all the people who had known him from when he was a little kid, now all his life

wanted to kill him. They seemed to have thought, “How dare you try to include others in what we have – in what is rightfully ours.”

This is why Jesus in Luke, just before this passage we read today, says he did not come to bring peace, or wholeness, but division. He says this even though his message is for unity. This is not because he seeks to divide, but because his message of unity is not welcome. The powers of this world prefer to prioritize ingroups and uniformity, but the message of Jesus is one in which every nation is called to come to him, and we are to lay down our life – our ingroups and identities – to follow him.

That means that with Jesus approaching Jerusalem in his journey from Galilee, the start of our passage is a warning from the people: *“Don’t you know what Pilate does to Galileans? You are all coming here with your Galilean accents and a reputation for trouble.”* This reputation comes both because of the prejudice many have against the region, but also, *“because you, Jesus, keep upsetting people with your message, your miracles, and your associations with outsiders.”* They want Jesus to know he’s coming from Herod’s land, and Pilate, who rules Judea for Rome as the Roman governor, only recently, killed a bunch of your fellow Galileans, mingling, or mixing their blood, with the sacrifices they were trying to make at the temple.

Jesus asks them if these Galileans were the worst of the Galileans to suffer this fate. Were they worse sinners than other Galileans? Were they worse troublemakers? If Galileans are such trouble, how come so many Galileans travel safely to Jerusalem? Jesus says, “No,” the Galileans killed by Pilate were not worse sinners. They were not singled out because they were particularly sinful. Yet if *you* do not repent – and repent means to change your thinking – likewise, you will all perish.

Then Jesus flips it around on them. He brings up a natural tragedy, that presumably killed Judeans. He says that 18 people were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them. Were these people debtors beyond all the other people living in Jerusalem? They were not causing trouble and neither Pilate, nor Rome, made a decision to kill them. Jesus again says, “No.” These Judeans were not singled out. They did not get what they had coming to them. Yet if you do not repent – change your thinking – again, Jesus says, “Likewise, you will perish.”

Beloved, we live in an age where we love to categorize people and claim our own identities. This really is no different than in Jesus’s age, except that we are now hyper-individualistic. They were more communal then. We have a whole lot more identities to which we cling to in order to show that we are truly unique. We place our singular unique identity at the center of a Venn diagram, where all of our different ingroups intersect and we say, “That’s me!”

This is not an accusation against you – I’m just as guilty of it as anyone else. But the truth is that not a one of these identities – the circles we stand at the center of – will spare us from death. Every single one of us in this room finds ourselves in the center of a Venn diagram and every single one of us will meet the same fate.

In my Venn diagram, I’m part of the farmer’s market. I’m part of Shelby Pres. I’m a native New Yorker and an American of Italian and German heritage. I’m a political moderate with a range of views and opinions. I’m a husband, a father, and the youngest of six kids. I’m a Christian and somewhere, in all of these circles and many more, there I am at the center – there lies my true identity. Right? Yet, this is not me. Not really.

When Jesus calls me to repentance, that call is to lay all of these things down. Now, I think all of the things I mentioned (and I left out the circles that might not be interpreted this way) are pretty good things. But what seems like my identity in the center there, can – and will – certainly become for

me an idol, a false god, that I might worship. If anywhere, one of these comes into conflict with God's call on my life, which will I choose? Which will you choose? Will I choose to maintain my ingroup status? Look at me, I signal my virtue to you, O right or O left, even when it is at the expense of others. Will I see those who get excluded as being somehow the worse sinners, and think they deserve what's happening to them?

What if the Farmer's Market were to suddenly decide to ban homeless people from entering the pavilion during the market? Would I make an excuse for this, not wanting to mess up my standing in the community I belong to? *Yeah, we could exclude people, just don't exclude me.* Or would I lay down my identity, the life and status I enjoy within this community, and choose to use my influence instead to do what's right? Would I do this, even if it meant my own exclusion from the market? Would I be able to lay down my own interests and advocate instead for the interests of others?

Jesus says that whoever tries to preserve their life, will instead lose their life. But whoever loses their life, and does so for his sake, will gain their life.

Beloved, the gospel is about the whole world coming under one King – Jesus the Messiah. This is why the eternal Son – fully one with the Father and the Holy Spirit – was sent by the Father to be born as a human being with every single one of our weaknesses. In Jesus, the Word of God, fully equal to God, became fully flesh equal to us.

And yet, in Jesus, the fullness of God which knew no sin, still became sin, as Paul says. He didn't sin but he lived in our sinful flesh. He revealed what it means to live fully in the Kingdom of God. And the world could not handle the love he proclaimed. It couldn't handle the things he was doing to push death back and the messages he proclaimed, so the powers of this world killed him. He was betrayed by one of his own friends, his own people, and Pontius Pilate lived up to that reputation of cruelty, hanging Jesus on a cross, where he died for us.

God did not have to endure this, but did so, on our behalf, to reconcile us to God so that we might share in Jesus's work to reconcile all the world to God through him. Beloved, the grave could not hold Jesus, and by the Spirit, he was raised for us. He lives and reigns as King of all Creation for us, and that same Holy Spirit which raised Jesus from the grave lives in and among us today as the church today. We are the temple of God. That Spirit pours love in our hearts so we are empowered to do what is right. The Spirit is with us, but not to signal to our ingroup for attention. It is with us to empower us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Beloved, I use the Farmer's Market as an example, but there are deeper concerns in our world today. Idolatry is real. There are many ingroups we value more than our faith in Jesus, if we're honest about it. We are tempted to seek our own benefit, even if it means excluding someone else. We often do this out of fear that we ourselves might be excluded. *If we don't do it to them, then they'll do it to us. Do unto others what you think they will do to you,* rather than what Jesus said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

We are tempted to see the consequences of another ingroup's actions, an outgroup's actions, as the natural result of their sins, their debts, or their inherent flaws. We perceive them as worse than our own sins, our own debts, and our own flaws. How tempting it is to push others down in order to lift ourselves up!

But Jesus tells us to do the opposite – he says repent, tell the truth of your own failures. Let your mind be changed, transformed by the Holy Spirit, and turn back to the Lord. God loves you so much that God will not stand by and let you stay exactly the way you are right now. That's what God's love is meant to do.

God loves you now, not for what you've done or accomplished, and not because you claim to be a Christian or part of any other ingroup. No, God loves you just the way you are and still desires you to grow every day and say, "yes" to his love. God wants us to say, "Yes, Jesus is Lord," as our new members will today – and become more like Jesus in every possible way.

See the parable of the fig tree – God has every right to cut us down if we do not bear fruit. That's the truth. Bearing fruit is not our own successes and accomplishments, but it is living for the Kingdom. Bearing fruit means loving God with all we have and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It means choosing the path of Jesus, who went out to the margins of society, and proclaimed God's love through his words and his actions. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, freed the captives, spoke up for those facing oppression or even death, and he gave his life, suffering death for us.

Beloved, there is a sense of urgency in Jesus's words this morning – Repent or you will all perish. We know the instructions – to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, and care for the sick. We know we must lay down our excuses for why we continue doing whatever sin it is that hurts us and others around us. We know we are not justified by anything other than Christ.

So, then we have to put those things aside. Be worried about your own sin and do what you can to help others. That's what happens when we put on the mind of Christ, and consider the needs of others, before our own, as Paul said in Philippians. This is just as Christ did, sharing in our humanity to live, die and rise again for us.

We see the vision of this Kingdom in Isaiah calling all to the comfort of the Lord, who feeds nourishing milk and food, and offers relaxing wine at no price to anyone. If any of the identities we hold onto keep us from living life this way in trusting the Lord and sharing with others, we must lay those down. We must do what is right, even if it means exclusion from our beloved ingroup. Jesus says the division brought on by him and his message will even split families. There is no greater in group than our families, but the Kingdom of God is far greater than anything else.

God says, "My ways are higher than yours." God speaks of God's paths. It's not "Everything happens for a reason." It means do what is right, what I told you to do, even if it doesn't seem it's going to work out for you because "my ways are higher than your ways."

Sisters and brothers, our faith is rooted in knowing and accepting that God loves us. If we truly know this and accept this, then we can trust that God is with us, especially in our suffering. We can trust this especially in the challenges of this life because Christ suffered with us.

It is because of this love of God, that we can do what's right in loving others, even if it means putting aside or closely held identities and that impossible task of loving our enemies. Beloved, this is the challenge of repentance. It is the challenge of letting our minds be changed. It is the challenge of turning back to the Lord on the cross, whose arms are extended to embrace us in love. Amen.