

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor  
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, March 24, 2019**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent/"People of the Passion"/Year C**  
**Primary Text: Luke 13:1-9**  
**Sermon Title: "The Leaders and Teachers of Israel"**

## **Theme**

*Five groups of religious people continually show up in the public ministry of Jesus and for the most part, are his adversaries to his end. Today we will look at two sects of Judaism – **Pharisees and Sadducees; scribes; and two classes of religious professionals – rabbis and priests.***

## **Text**

<sup>1</sup>At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

<sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' <sup>8</sup>He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

## **Sermon**

Some context is required to understand today's Gospel Reading. Most peasant Jews were not happy being under the control of Rome. The Romans overtaxed the Jews and treated them like slaves. Insurrection was not uncommon. It happens that just before this reading took place two tragic events occurred that had the Jews talking. The first event refers to an insurrection of a group of Jews called the Zealots.

The Zealots were anti-Roman terrorist. Details are sketchy and hard to find but biblical scholars seem to think that those referred to were caught in a terrorist plot against their Roman overlords and Pilate had them killed. The “sacrifice” that was being reported to Jesus was most likely referring to the patriotic martyrdom of these Galileans on behalf of the Jewish people.

A little later on Jesus referred to another local tragedy; eighteen were killed when a tower fell on them. This most likely referred to the construction of an aqueduct that the Romans were building using cheap Jewish labor.

Welcome to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Weekend of Lent and the third installment in my sermon series, "People of the Passion" this week focusing on the "Leaders and Teachers of Israel" those who were responsible for the spiritual development of the Jewish people. And since the Gospel Reading sets up the Pharisees, let's begin there.

## **Pharisees**

The Pharisees were a sect of Judaism – maybe not unlike Christian denominations. As you know, not all Christians believe and practice their faith the same way. The same was true of Judaism in Jesus' day and remains true today.

The Pharisees, who were opposed to using force to deal with the Romans, were the ones who got the community talking about these events referred to in the Gospel Reading. The name “Pharisee” means “separate ones” in Hebrew and so it comes as no surprise to learn that they had their own traditions on how to live lives faithful to Judaism. Their internal rules were sectarian with an emphasis on ritual purity, food, tithes, and Sabbath observances. They were admired by the people and functioned, at least some of the time, as a social and political force against foreign and Hellenized Jewish leaders. In other words they didn't like the Romans or

anyone who appeared to them to be working with them cooperatively. They also tended to be pacifists. The Pharisees believed in an afterlife, but because they were bound up in observance of the law, the afterlife was reserved for those who were ritually pure. If, in your mind you have an image of an overly religious condescending snob, then I believe you have the right picture.

So then, the Pharisees saw the insurgents who were killed by Pilate as sinful terrorist set upon murder, which of course did not meet their pacifist agenda. And they saw those who were killed in the construction project as just deserts for conspiring with the enemy whom they considered unclean Gentiles.

Jesus took issue with their logic. People lost their lives in tragic ways. Some died for their freedom – they were putting themselves at risk for the good of their country. Jesus did not pass judgment on them for that. Others did whatever they had to do to survive under the brutal reign of the Romans. At the end of the day – both parties were equally and tragically dead. And while some in the crowds, namely the Pharisees wanted to capitalize on the tragic death of those two parties as endorsement for their own party's agenda, Jesus said they and all the rest are missing the points – and there were three of them.

- Dead is dead.
- Life in this world is not the issue.
- Life in the next world is the issue.

And the criterion for determining where one spends eternity is the sincerity of one's relationship with God.

Well, this was just another day in the three-year confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. They were stuck in their rituals and disciplines living their lives as if getting stars on their charts will be enough to impress God and get them into heaven. But in their cold and calculating pietistic lives they have lost God.

People lost their lives and the Pharisees were using this tragedy for political gain. Jesus told them, "Shame on you. Shame on you twice. Once because you are wrong about my Father, and twice because you are trying to lead others astray with your bad theology. Repentance is what is called for here or you will perish just as anyone does who does not know and who is not known by my Father."

## **Sadducees**

There was another sect of Judaism, and they were known as the Sadducees. The Sadducees were of the wealthy ruling class in Jesus' day. Many of them comprised the priesthood that controlled the Temple in Jerusalem and the Jewish legal council called the Sanhedrin. They were in some ways more conservative than the Pharisees. They only recognized the Torah, the first five books of the Bible allegedly dictated by God and written down by Moses, as the inspired word of God. They acknowledged neither the prophets nor the oral traditions that came after the Torah. Consequently, they did not believe in the resurrection or any life after death. They were often at odds with the Pharisees over this matter and others.

People had different ways of reacting to Roman occupation. The Sadducees thought it was best to try to get along with Rome. Why not? They were well off, and as long as they kept on Rome's good side, they could live comfortable lives.

The Sadducees opposed Jesus because they feared the people, and they feared Rome, and they liked the way things were. The vast majority of the Jews did not share the Sadducees acceptance of Roman rule. The vast majority of the Jews believed the messiah would come, sword in hand, and drive the Gentiles out of the Promised Land. Even though Jesus never spoke against Rome or advocated rebellion, the Sadducees shared the popular view of what the messiah would be. Thus, in their minds, any messiah figure was a threat to their power.

## **Priesthood**

In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine there was no separation between church and state. The priests at the Temple in Jerusalem not only officiated over the religious life of the Jews, they were also the limited rulers and judges over their Jewish constituency.

Last week I told you that Herod (Antipas) was a Jew, just not a very good one. Herod was himself a pawn of Rome, and had his own pawns installed in the Jewish priesthood. By the 1<sup>st</sup> Century the High Priest was a political appointment rather than anything religious or spiritual. The Romans wanted the priesthood to support their occupation, and the Herods made sure their desire was carried out. Those priests in highest positions, the chief priests and the high priest, were sympathetic to

Rome and were undoubtedly in Rome's back pocket. We see evidence of this loyalty to and fear of Rome in the Gospels.

The priesthood lived in luxury well beyond that of the average Jew. They supported their lavish lifestyles with a Temple tax which every Jew was required to pay. The Temple taxes combined with taxes imposed by Herod and Rome were literally threatening the existence of the Jewish people. But the priesthood exhibited little concern.

The priesthood was jealous of Jesus' popularity among the people, but their main motivation for seeking to kill Jesus was fear. When a new king came to power, he would set his version of the priesthood in place. All this talk of Jesus becoming the new king undoubtedly unnerved the priests in Jerusalem. If Jesus came to power, they thought they would be out of a job or killed. And the Romans did not take too kindly to unauthorized kings, so in the opinion of the priesthood, Jesus was inviting the wrath of Rome. They did not understand that Jesus' kingdom was not of this world and his priesthood was not according to flesh and blood.

## **Sanhedrin**

The ancient Jewish court system was called the Sanhedrin. The Great Sanhedrin was the supreme religious body in the land of Israel during the time of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

The Sanhedrin was a religious assembly of seventy sages presided over by the high priest. The seventy were the elders of the Jewish community including priests, rabbis, Pharisees, and Sadducees. With the exception of the Sabbath and festivals, the Sanhedrin met daily in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the final authority on Jewish law, and anyone who went against its decisions was put to death. However, in about 30 CE, or just before the Sanhedrin interrogated Jesus, it lost its authority to inflict capital punishment; hence the need to involve Pilate and Herod and the Roman authority in the Passion.

The Sanhedrin could not initiate arrests. Rather it judged accused lawbreakers. It required a minimum of two witnesses to convict a suspect. There were no attorneys. Instead, the accusing witness stated the offense in the presence of the accused and the accused could call witnesses on his or her own behalf. Then the

Sanhedrin questioned the accused, the accusers and the defense witnesses. We see this taking place in the Passion of Jesus.

The Sanhedrin, as an institution of Judaism, was established by God in Moses' day as the body through which laws were established and the Jews were judged. It, as an institutional body, should have been impartial in dealing with Jesus, but individually, it was made up of those we have just discussed and so as a body, they opposed Jesus.

### **The Charges Against Jesus**

His adversaries could not simply go before Pilate and ask for the death of Jesus based on jealousy and hatred, so they concocted charges by taking things that Jesus really did say out of context and using them against him; but other charges against Jesus were true, but blasphemous according to the Sanhedrin:

- Before the Sanhedrin Jesus was asked if he was the Christ (anointed one) and the Son of God. Depending on the Gospel source, Jesus agreed or at least did not deny it. This was blasphemy! – and the sentence for blasphemy was death.
- Before Pilate, Jesus was asked if he was King of the Jews. He answered ambiguously and Pilate found him not guilty.
- So the Sanhedrin upped their accusations claiming that Jesus
  - stirred up the people with his teachings;
  - put himself up against Caesar;
  - and forbade the Jews to pay tribute to Caesar.

True, not true, and not true.

In a sense, the charges against Jesus were irrelevant. What Jesus was really guilty of was:

- embarrassing the leaders and teachers of Israel,
- earning their jealousy by telling them they were wrong specifically about nature of his Heavenly Father,

- and placing the emphasis on holy living on complying with their system of rules and laws and so on, rather than on worshiping God by pleasing God with holy living and seeking God's forgiveness when they failed.

And to conclude, I would like to return to the Gospel Reading for today and the parable of the fruitless fig tree.

In this little parable Jesus pointed out what will happen to a fruitless fig tree. The gardener can afford to be only so patient. No expense will be spared to give the tree everything it needs to produce a harvest. But at some point in time, determined only by the owner of the orchard, a decision will have to be made. And the logical question is, why should more valuable time and space and resources be used up on a tree that will not produce a harvest?

In this way Jesus told those within his hearing that day that God will not tolerate their lack of productivity forever. They, especially the Pharisees and others we discussed today who are dead or dying in their spirit lives with God are like the fruitless fig tree.

God gave them the Law and they worshiped it rather than the giver of the law. So then God gave them the prophets and they did not heed their warnings and killed the prophets.

In Jesus, they were getting their one last good dose of spiritual fertilizer. Jesus himself had come to try one last time to straighten them out; to get them to produce fruit. And if they don't, well then, there is really no use for them to be taking up valuable space in the kingdom.

And while some might see this parable as a threat, Jesus never threatened anyone. He was simply pointing out that time is running out to produce good fruit. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Priests and the Sanhedrin and all those who opposed Jesus then, and those who oppose him now are like that fruitless fig tree. A time will come when all will be judged by the fruit they produce.

Let me ask you a sincere question. Do you find elements of the religious life of the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests and Sanhedrin within your spiritual life or the life of

your church? Are you guilty as they were of seeking and maybe even worshiping a false messiah of your own desire and making?

We can't do that. God is God and we are not. In the First Reading God spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways". And Jesus Christ is God's own son, and that makes him God. And he is himself the fullness of God in human form. We don't get to give him a makeover to suit our needs. This is what the leaders and teachers of Israel did. We cannot let that be our sin. He is our example for godly living. We need to model our life after his, not try to make him into what we want a messiah to be.

During this season of Lent, I have asked you in many and various ways to reflect on your own spiritual lives. Do you see good fruit produced out of your life? Do you see good fruit produced out of the life of your church – locally or nationally?

It is not too late. Now is the time for reflection and repentance – a turning from old sinful ways to new God-honoring ways – so that we can make changes that produce good fruit. Now is the day of your salvation.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, we worship you in spirit and truth to the best of our abilities. Guide us by your Holy Spirit that all we do is acceptable to you. We pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen