

Sunday's Sermon

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

March 23, 2025

The Reverend David E. Fox

Third Sunday in Lent (Year C) 2025

Luke 13.1-9

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

At one point in our life or another, we all felt like we did not belong. A movie that comes to mind is the movie titled, *Nerds*. The Lamda Lamda Lamda fraternity has been told over and over they do not belong at their school or in the world.

Towards the end of the movie, Gilbert gives a speech around the bonfire, where the entire school and alumni have gathered. He starts his monologue with, "I just want to say that I'm a nerd and I'm here to stand up for the lives of other nerds." He goes on to say, "All of our lives, we have been laughed at and made to feel inferior... Why? I'm a nerd and proud of it."

His fraternity brother and close friend, Lewis, goes up to join him and declares that he, too, is a nerd. Lewis says, "I have news for all the beautiful people, there's a lot more of us than there are of you." He then invites anyone who has ever been called names or felt as if they had been stepped on, left out, picked on, etc. to come and join them in front of the stage. Nearly everyone comes from where they were standing or sitting and joins them. They all get together and begin to chant, "Nerds. Nerds. Nerds. Nerds."

It is an epic ending to a hilarious movie, and it drives home that no matter who you are, no matter if you are the weirdest person known to humankind, you belong. We all are in need of champions like Gilbert and Lewis to remind us that we belong. In fact, the world we live in, so desperately needs to hear this message, that no matter who you are, you belong, you are worthy, and you are loved.

In our gospel reading for today, we have Jesus being propositioned with a scenario concerning a group of outsiders and how they were brutally punished – murdered because of their past actions. Jesus responds with, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all others?" He answers his own question with an emphatic "No." Then Jesus calls for them to repent with urgency.

Jesus then moves on to another situation of folks who died a tragic death and says that their sins did not cause this. Here, Jesus is leveling the playing field when it comes to sin. No sin is greater than another, and your sin doesn't correlate with what happens in your life. Of course, there are some things like driving while intoxicated where you are surely going to end up killing yourself

or others, but overall our sins are not correlated with life's punishments. The karma bubble has burst, here.

Jesus, a second time, urges everyone to repent. Repentance is to have a change in direction or a change of one's mind. Jesus wants them to think differently and act differently; because they are thinking that those who are not like them, are not good enough and do not belong. Then Jesus rolls into sharing a parable to solidify his point, and the parable is where we will get most of the meat of our Good News from today's gospel.

There's this fig tree planted in the middle of a vineyard. The owner of the vineyard saw the fig tree had not produced any fruit in a number of years and ordered that it be cut down. The gardener stands up for the tree and says leave it alone, I'll tend to it, and if it doesn't produce fruit by next year you can cut it down.

For us, today, we may not think much about this fig tree in the vineyard, but for these first-century folks hearing the gospel for the first time, this would have been a crazy notion. They may have even begun to laugh at such a story. A person who owned a vineyard would have never planted a fig tree in the middle of their field of vines. Never. That's because fig trees have an enormous root system and they require a massive amount of nutrients. They would suck up the nutrients that the vines would have needed to produce grapes. This fig tree does not belong in this story. This fig tree is not good enough to be planted amongst the vines. The hearers of this parable would have agreed with the vineyard owner that this fig tree needed to be chopped down, if nothing else for the sake of the vineyard.

The fig tree cannot stand up for itself and give a rebuttal as to why it should be allowed to stay; but the servant of the vineyard owner, the gardener, stands against it being cut down and offers to tend to it – even offering to give it some extra attention. The gardener was a champion for the fig tree and showed that it indeed belonged in the vineyard. The world we live in so desperately needs to hear this message, that no matter who you are, you belong, you are worthy, and you are loved.

We live in a time and place where millions are walking around lonely, because they've been told over and over – either outright or passively that they do not belong. You're not rich enough. You're not pretty enough. You're not fit enough. You're not cool enough. You're not smart enough. You're not strong enough. You're not quick enough. You're... not enough. What world are we living in? The island of misfit toys? No one seems to belong except for the one-percent.

There was a clothing store that was popular when I was in high school. The CEO is in trouble at the moment, until he pays or the company pays everyone off. They created an empire of only a certain select group who could wear their clothing. They even sized things a size smaller than what the tag said. You could imagine what that did emotionally to teenagers who already struggle with body image – that's right, they felt they weren't good enough.

Go to any football stadium and wear the opposing teams colors, you are guaranteed to be heckled and told you do not belong. We're living in a day and time where if we don't fit the mold, they're crying "CUT IT DOWN!" Maybe they're even singing, "Let it die. Let it die. Let it shrivel up

and die,” from the movie *The Lorax*. The world we live in so desperately needs to hear this message, that no matter who you are, you belong, you are worthy, and you are loved.

Lent is a season where we are called to fast, pray, and give alms. It is also a season that we focus on repentance. We are called to change our minds, to change our ways.

In today’s parable, there is a lot of change happening. Presumably, the vineyard owner has allowed the gardener to tend to the tree one more year, meaning his mind had been changed. Presumably, the gardener does what he says he will do, and therefore the way that he has cared for this tree has changed. Presumably, manure has been put around the tree and therefore the nutrients and the soil around the tree has changed. And last, but not least, we have been rooting for this tree since we first heard this story, our hope is the tree was changed because it was supported in a big way to produce fruit, and therefore not be chopped with an axe.

Are we the one’s calling out for those that do not belong to be eradicated? Or, are we those who will be the champions for those who need another chance, a better chance, or just a chance to begin with. I know which voice is that of Christ’s. And I suspect you have a good idea, too. We know, because we all are sinners in need of a Savior – in need of a champion to stand up for us and to give us a second chance.

Today we are being called to stand by those who have been told they do not belong and to be their champion, to care for them, and to help them to flourish in this world. Too many people have given up on this world that God created and called “good” and we call it evil and suspect that it has no chance of turning itself around. What if this fallen world is that fig tree? Will you be the one who nurtures it back to fruit-producing health, or will you join the mob to cut it down? The world we live in so desperately needs to hear this message, that no matter who you are, you belong, you are worthy, and you are loved.

Sisters and brothers, the world needs to know that they belong and that they have a champion rooting for them and standing up for them. And not only does the world need to hear it, but you need to hear it. Jesus loves you, even those of you who have been stepped on, left out, or picked on. Jesus is our champion. And when we fail to produce fruit, and let’s face it, we all fail to produce fruit in our lives, Jesus tends to our roots and gives another fighting chance. You too belong, you too are worthy, and you too are loved.