

The worst sinners



Luke 13:1-9

Year C Lent 3

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	●	▲
▲	Man - a man who's terrified God is about to strike him down	▲	
▲	Woman - a woman who's terrified God is about to strike her down	▲	
■	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲	■
●	Jesus	▲	
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus		▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor		▲
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room		▲

Scene 1

James , Jesus , John , Man , Woman

{James tries to fend off two desperate visitors who absolutely must talk to Jesus.}

James I told you for the last time, the rabbi isn't taking any visitors just now!

Man Please! Please let us see him. It's a matter of great urgency!

Woman We have to have his help!

{John enters.}

John What's going on? *[to the couple]* How can we help you?

Man We've heard that your rabbi has great powers, and great wisdom.

Woman We have a problem only he can help us with!

John *[to James]* It seems pretty urgent.

James It's *not* urgent.

Woman It's a matter of life and death!

John *[to the couple]* Is someone sick? Has there been an accident?

Man *[indignantly]* There certainly *has* been an "accident"! Twenty people have died!

John Dear Lord! James, I think we should wake the rabbi.

James *[flatly]* No we shouldn't. Just keep listening. *[firmly to the couple]* Tell him who died.

Woman Twenty Galileans!

Man While they were performing their weekly sacrifices.

John Weekly?

James They're a sect that believes in making sacrifice every week, among other weirdo rituals.

Man *[firmly]* They're not weird! *[shakily]* Or...we didn't used to think so, but...

Woman Could we just please speak with your rabbi!

John I'm sorry to hear about these people who died, but I have to confess, I still don't understand why you need to speak to him about them.

Man *We were members of that sect!*

{A pause while everybody absorbs this.}

Woman Three weeks ago, a traveling teacher just like your rabbi came to speak to us. We thought he'd encourage us or challenge us in our faith, but instead, he condemned us for what he said was sacrilege.

Man He said we were worse sinners than even the Romans, and warned us that God would judge us.

John I see. And now twenty of you have died.

Man Struck down as they were performing the very sacrifices the man condemned us for!

Woman We have to know if *we're* in danger. If we should repent.

Man Or if it's too late.

John *[to James]* This does seem pretty urgent.

James *[to John]* Are you kidding? They're a couple of neurotics! We can't go waking up the rabbi for every little anxiety someone wants to unload on him!

{Jesus enters.}

Jesus *[sleepily]* What's the fuss?

James Now you've done it!

John Rabbi, these people say they need to talk to you.

Jesus Of course. How can I help you?

Man Two days ago, twenty Galileans died while performing their sacrifices.

Jesus Ah, yes. They called themselves Israeli Renewal, didn't they?

Woman Yes! How did you know that?

Jesus I think I also know what you've come to ask me. You were members of that sect, weren't you?

Man Dear God!

Woman Yes. Yes we are. We're the only surviving members.

Jesus You think your comrades were struck down for their sins, don't you? For heresy or sacrilege.

Man A teacher just like you called us the worst sinners in Galilee.

Woman Were they? Are we?

Jesus Truly I tell you: those twenty were far from the worse sinners in

the land. *[to everybody]* Indeed, unless you all repent, you'll suffer the same fate! Or consider the eighteen who were crushed by that tower that collapsed. Do you think they were the worst sinners in Jerusalem? Truly I tell you: unless you repent, you'll die just like they did!

Man *[distracted]* Dear God! What are we going to do?

Woman *[frantically]* The Temple! We've got to go to the Temple! We can confess our sin. We can still offer a proper sacrifice!

{The couple run off.}

John Wait! Where are you going? What's wrong?

Scene 2

James , Joanna , John , Judas , Peter

{Jesus has returned to his nap. John seeks out Joanna.}

John *[urgently]* Joanna, could you take my cooking shift today? I'll owe you two.

Joanna Sure, what's up?

John I've got to go after this couple the rabbi just spoke to. I just realized they completely misunderstood what he told them!

{James enters along with Peter and Judas.}

John James, did you see the direction that couple went?

James What, the ones we were talking to just now?

John Yeah, I'm going after them.

James Why?

John To tell them they misinterpreted what the rabbi said.

James They did?

John That's why they were so freaked out. I didn't realize it initially, but they must have taken the exact opposite message from what the rabbi intended.

Judas What's going on? I thought the rabbi was napping.

James He was but these people came to talk to him and woke him up, and then he blasted them and they ran off in a panic.

Joanna *[skeptically]* "Blasted them"? Over what?

John But he didn't. Or at least, I don't think he did, but James seems to disagree.

James I can't believe you didn't get what he was saying. *I* did. That couple did. And I'll bet -

Peter *[interrupting]* Guys! We do this all the time. We argue over what the rabbi said or what he meant when we can just ask him. Can we just this once wait until he finishes his nap?

Joanna But I'm curious. At least tell us what he said.

Peter No! That's how it always starts!

Judas *[to Peter]* If it's any consolation to you, asking the rabbi directly probably wouldn't lead to crystal clarity, either!

John Well, this couple came wanting to ask him about twenty Galileans who apparently died recently while -

Peter Performing their weird sacrifices?

James Yeah, how'd you know?

Peter Judas told me about them.

Judas I heard it from one of my contacts in the city. I was the one who told the rabbi about it.

John Well, these two people were the only surviving members of that sect.

Judas Ah, then I can understand why they came. They were afraid of being killed themselves, weren't they?

John Yes!

James See? Even Judas sees it my way.

Joanna I still don't understand what the disagreement is about. Could someone explain *that*?

John Sorry. These people were afraid that the death of the others was a judgment from God, and they were afraid they would be struck down next.

James And that's exactly what the rabbi told them! He told them they'd be judged just as harshly if they didn't repent.

John Yes, but did you notice how carefully he worded it? He never said outright that the death of those Galileans was a punishment for their sins. And he didn't just warn them about God's judgment, he warned all of us.

Peter I don't see what difference that makes.

John If the rabbi had meant to say that Yes, they were being punished for their sins, there are so many ways he could have expressed it that would leave no doubt. For one thing, he could have just said, "Yes, they were struck down as a punishment for their sins." Or if he wanted to make it clear that they weren't the *worst* sinners but their deaths were still due to God's judgment, he could have said, "No, they weren't the worst sinners, but they were still bad enough to be punished by death as they were." Instead, he very carefully refused to say either Yes or No.

Joanna I think I see what John means. This was another case of the rabbi changing the subject, not really answering the question that was asked.

John Exactly. He was asked if bad things happening to people meant they were being judged, but instead of answering that question, he basically said, "What you should really worry about is whether *you'll* be judged."

Joanna That does sound like him.

John And he gave another example that made it even more clear. He talked about those people who were crushed by the tower.

Judas You mean the tower of Siloam? Last month?

John Yup.

Peter But they were just random people going about their business.

John Exactly. He said that one might equally ask if they were great sinners as well. But of course, they weren't. It was just an accident. And the lesson is that you can't interpret bad luck as meaning a person is being judged. The one thing you *can* do is make sure your

own conscience is clear.

Judas Well, that's a relief.

Joanna You're relieved that those people weren't terrible sinners, after all?

Judas No, I'm relieved the rabbi is not a nut after all!

James [*angrily*] What are you saying? How can you call him that? You know, I've been watching you lately, and I -

Judas Easy! Easy! I explicitly said he was *not* a nut.

Peter But why would you even think he *might* be?

Judas Because I thought he was teaching that when terrible things happen to people, it must be because they were terrible sinners who were being judged. Which he wasn't, right? So I'm *not* calling him a nut, okay? But it's the kind of view often espoused by the fanatical and irrational, the simple-minded. So I was alarmed. But I'm not now.

James [*insistently*] But that *is* what he was teaching! So you *are* calling him - and me! - a nut! A simpleton!

Peter [*to James*] So you're sticking to your guns, huh? Why? Not that it matters to me. All this is over my head. If the world works one way, then I'm fine with it. If it works the other way, that's all right, too. I'm just a passenger.

James The reason I'm so sure is the parable he told.

Joanna Parable? He told a parable, too?

John James, I don't remember him telling any parable.

James [*outraged*] What? Are you kidding me? [*suddenly understanding*] Oh, wait! He told it after you left! The couple ran off and you went back to the camp, but then they came running back to make sure they heard the rabbi right. And he told them a parable that convinced them.

Judas [*with sudden urgency*] All right. Tell us the parable as accurately as you can. Don't leave anything out!

James [*sarcastically*] Don't worry. I might be a simpleton, but the parable was short enough for my feeble brain to remember. [*pausing to recollect it*] A man went out on his property and saw that a certain fig tree wasn't bearing fruit, so he told his gardener to trash it. But the gardener said, "Wait! Let me try to save it first. I can fertilize it and improve

its irrigation. Then, after a year, if it still isn't bearing fruit, I'll cut it down as you ordered ."

Joanna And that was it?

James Yup.

Peter I don't get it.

John I think I do. The point is that *everyone* is under judgment. No one's without sin. So there's a sense in which anything bad that happens to anybody *is* a sign that they're being judged. And if random people are escaping disaster, it's only because the owner of the property is giving them a little more time.

Joanna Maybe. But it still doesn't quite hold together for me. There's only "a sense", as you say, in which it's true.

James Well, it was enough "sense" for the rabbi, and for me, and for those people. They lit out for the hills!

Judas That was wise of them.

Peter You still think they're in danger of judgment, even though you don't believe they were awful sinners?

Judas That's not why I thought they were in danger in the first place. Didn't they tell you *who* killed their comrades? Didn't the rabbi?

John I never thought to ask! I guess I just pictured them being struck down by lightning or something like that.

Judas Would that they had been! As I told the rabbi when I first reported this to him, those people were killed by Pilate!

{A stunned pause by all.}

Joanna Dear Lord! You told us that, but I didn't think about the implications. They weren't killed for their sins against *God*...

John They were killed for their sins against the Romans!

Judas Exactly. They weren't just a religious sect. They were political. They preached the imminent liberation of the Israel.

Peter So what? So do we - Wait! That means we could be next!

James *[calling out]* Rabbi! *[to the others]* I think we should wake him. *[calling out]*
Rabbi! Rabbi!

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