This – this Gospel story is why I am Christian. The story of this passage summarizes my life and love of Jesus. Except. That this passage is also full of layers and double meanings. It is hard to know what is happening unless you hear all the backstory and the symbolism.

So let me share a treasure of my heart. Let me tell you this story again, but disclose all that is hidden in history and mystery. It all starts with Jesus. Some disciples have gathered around Jesus for some social time. There would be men and women, probably a few kids. They look different than we do when we gather for some social time. Ancient Galileans dressed in homespun fabrics. They are probably outside, gathered in the shade of an olive tree. And they defiantly smelled different. Ancient cities of this period were tightly packed, lacked sewage systems, and sheep, goats, and captive birds added to the sights, sounds, and smells.

Despite the differences, this community is doing exactly the same things we do when we gather for social time after church. A tiny bit of talking about God, a little bit catching up on who is doing what, and some talking about the news and trying to make sense of the world. In the Galilean news right now is Pontius Pilate. He has killed a bunch of Galileans. Then Pilate took the blood of these people and added it to the ritual sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. This is a shocking sacrilege. A great dishonor to the temple and to those now dead Galileans. How could this even happen?

Human minds like to have stories. In stories, things happen for a reason. When we hear something has happened, we turn it into a story with reasons. We can imagine this community telling this story.

They say, "Did you hear about those Galileans? What is the reason for this terrible death?" Some might ask, "what did they do to made Pontius so angry?" But in this time and at this place, many more people will ask, "What did they do to make God angry. They MUST have been terrible sinners. That is the reason for this terrible death." Filled with a deliciously gossip-worthy awful story, the community turns to Jesus. And they tell the teacher about those horrible sinners, those Galileans that Pontius killed.

Jesus says, "no." Jesus refuses to wonder about the sin of these people. Instead, Jesus tells a story about eighteen random people killed in Jerusalem when a tower fell down. Jesus says sometimes there is no reason. Sometimes death and suffering are just death and suffering. Sometimes, our stories about other people's sins are as destructive as death and suffering.

Then Jesus says unless you repent, you will perish. In the swirl of noise from bleating goats and chatting passers-by, in the dust of dirt from sandal scuffs and the smell of your buddies that haven't washed in more than a month – Jesus tells a story. He says, "a man planted a fig tree."

"Oh," said everyone who was listening. They know a fig tree is a symbol for the community of God. So everyone here knew that Jesus was talking about them. This tree was planted in a vineyard. The vineyard is a symbol for the people of Israel. We are rooted in the vineyard of Israel.

Jesus continues his story and tells how the man went looking for fruit on the fig tree. Every year for three years.

"Yes," said everyone who was listening. They know planting a tree is an investment for the future. The fruit would take years to show up. It is important to wait a while. They knew that Jesus was telling them that it would take time to bear the fruit of the spirit.

But you might be asking, "What is the fruit of the spirit?" A fruitful spirit is a repentant spirit. The people listening to this story would then scuffle a little awkwardly. They had just been talking about sin and death, but sin and death aren't what Jesus wants to talk about. Jesus wants to talk about the lifegiving truth of repentance.

Jesus continues, he then said the man told his gardener that he expected fruit. It was time to cut that tree down.

The people listening are alarmed now. They know they are the tree; will they be cut down, separated from life?

Jesus goes on. "The gardener says, 'well, wait a minute now. Let's provide some more support and nutrients before we give up.'"

The people listening let out an audible sigh of relief.

But Jesus continues to tell his story. In the end, the gardener agrees that if this tree doesn't smarten up and fruit right, then it will be cut down.

The people who a moment ago were enjoying the marvelous gossip of those Galilean 'sinners' are humbled.

The fruit of the spirit is a repentant spirit.

It can take time and nurturing to develop a repentant spirit.

To be fully alive, our fullest, most beautiful life now, and our salvation, life everlasting is connected to a repentant spirit.

But, remember the first part of our story. The focus and the fruit is repentance. Sin is not the issue. This is very important. Let me see if I can make this super clear.

Here we see a key assumption by Jesus and the early church. Jesus and the early church tell us that all humans sin all the time. ALL THE TIME. Remember, sin is a turning away from God. We sin when we choose to ignore God's invitation to a holy life, and we sin when we get distracted and focused on our own wants and needs. To live a human life is to sin. Catholics differentiate between really bad sin and everyday sin because there is so much sin. So much sin. I know I sit down to pray. I set my heart to praise God and then get distracted by my own thoughts or daydreams and turn away from God. I sin.

But that we sin is not the point. Sin is like dust. It's just there, a messy part of life. The thing that Jesus wants us to pay attention to. The practice that Jesus wants to nurture and encourage- is repenting. The turning to God. The repenting is full of life and hope and holy. Repentance is the chance to find our fullest, most beautiful, most delightful, richest life with God. To turn to God is to live our fullest selves now and forever. To do anything less is to perish, to fade away.

The stores of the saints give us juicy examples.

St Peter sinned. When Jesus was captive in Jerusalem, Peter denied him. Peter turned away again and again. Three times. What makes St Peter a saint is not that he was perfect, but that he returned to God.

St Francis sinned. Francis did everything Jesus told people not to do. He spent lavishly on his own comfort; he ignored the church and went to war for glory. What makes St Francis a saint is not that he was perfect. St Francis learned to repent and return to God. And if you want to hear what joy sounds like- listen to the stories of the bliss and fun St Francis had when he was re-turning to God.

More recently, St Oscar Romero of El Salvador has been made a saint. He was not perfect. In his early priestly life, Oscar turned away from God to appease the worldly powers of a violent dictator. And then he repented. Re-turned to God. Re-turned to God and led his people to freedom and a fuller life in God.

In every case, the place to look for the fruit of the spirit is not discerning what kind of sin, or how much sin or the reasons for sin, or God's anger. That is not useful. What is useful is looking at repentance and following that example.

This Lent, we, the community of Holy Cross, are a fig tree. If the gardener came by, we can trust that we will be nurtured. And, God, the owner of all, will be coming by to check that there is fruit. Notice this, my friends in Christ. God is not looking at the sins. That is assumed. Of course, you have turned away from God. Like a fig tree has leaves, humans get distracted and turn away from God. Of course, you have sinned. But have you repented? Not as punishment, no blame, no shame, only, like St Francis, a joyful turning to see that God is still there and welcoming you.

This and every Lent, we are invited to be penitents. This is not as punishment and shame. This is an invitation to the fruitful finest life. This is an invitation to the joy of being more aware of God's presence in every part of your life. This Lent, and always, you are invited, nurtured, loved, towards repentance, re-turning towards God.