

“Another Chance” – Lk 13:1-9 – Lent 3 – Mar 14/04

Another tragedy as terror rears its ugly head once more, with the cold and calculated killing of 200 innocents in a series of bombings in Spain, and the injuring of more than a thousand others. It's too easy to become detached from such events, for our minds to close it off, to put it “somewhere over there”, to depersonalize it and objectify it, all to protect our own emotions. I often chunter and complain at CNN (sometimes even send emails), but I have to give them credit for adding a few personal details to their coverage of the story, especially the descriptions of victims' cell phones ringing with calls from worried friends and relatives, phones that went unanswered.

We're almost too numbed to properly see the surviving victims, sitting on curbs and pavement, bloodied and dazed, wondering what happened, not yet addressing the question, “why?” But that question comes soon enough, and many if not most or even all of the surviving victims will search both deeply within themselves and also far and wide for answers to the questions, “why me?”, and even more poignantly with the ultimate survivors guilt question, “why wasn't it me who died?”

And of course the next trauma to be suffered in this tragedy is the inevitable surfacing of the question, “what sins are they being punished for?” Oh, that question won't appear on the front pages of the newspapers. Neither will it be asked directly even in the midst of the rampant speculation so common on the TV news channels. “What sins are they being punished for?” This is the insidious question that gets asked in quieter circles, and if in public usually only from a pulpit. Of all of the questions asked by people since the beginning of being able to ask questions, this is probably the one that has lived the longest, and dug the deepest into people's psyches.

Even much of the understanding of God to be found in the Old Testament echoes this sentiment that disaster is the payback for sin. The problem comes from an inversion of faith that starts with the positive idea that being faithful to God results in being blessed by God. Most primitive religions share this same understanding, presenting pleasing offerings before their gods, hoping that the gods will be pleased with the offerings and will send down in response rain, or sunshine, or useful wind, or fertility, or whatever. The problems begin, naturally enough, when the desired response doesn't materialize. Extended drought, too much rain at the wrong time, not enough children or children of the wrong gender, invading armies of either people or pests were all seen as signs of displeasure of the gods, or even of God in ancient Israel, and the question immediately began to be asked, “how have we offended God?”, or in fancier terms, “how have we sinned?” We shouldn't be too critical of our ancestors, however, because a theology of ‘curses and blessings’ is an easy theology to develop, or adopt.

I have a little less patience and tolerance for people today who still hold this kind of theology. Oh, not the people outside the church – I can understand how they can easily latch on to a ‘curses and blessings’ kind of understanding of the universe. The people who push my buttons are the people within the church who still hold this kind of “what did they do wrong to deserve this?” faith, and there are plenty of them around. Interestingly enough they are often the same people who insist that God is directly and totally responsible for every little thing that happens in life (the ‘God has a perfect plan’ mantra). It is always painfully difficult to watch people like them twist themselves into theological knots trying to explain to grieving parents why a young child died, or some other tragedy or disaster has hit some decent, faithful people. They have no good answers to the age-old question, “why do bad things happen to good people?”, and are too quick to blame God for tragedies, even if they are horrified when this is pointed out to them.

I recently had to sit through a sermon delivered (no, not here!) by a colleague who holds this kind of theology. Oh the exegesis was good enough, contemporary, thoughtful, even included some decent biblical scholarship. It was in the application that it suddenly went off the rails, implying if not stating explicitly that horribly insensitive and horribly incorrect notion that AIDS is somehow God's

payback for sexual orientation. Many of us were uncomfortable, and it's only Presbyterian politeness that kept us from being disruptive. Mind you, it was probably Presbyterian politeness that also kept others who agreed from doing the latest "hoo! wah!" lockstep salute in sympathy.

That person is not alone, unfortunately, as I heard very recently an enthusiastic lay review of another colleague's preaching ... "Oh yeah, he had that love stuff in there, but best of all there was the real stuff about sin!"

The very, very unfortunate part about such a perspective is that it is not even scriptural, at least not in the sense of agreeing with what Jesus had to say. So often we hear (when we're listening, that is!) Jesus tell those who would listen, "you say ...; but I tell you ...", and this text from Luke is yet another example. There are two obvious parts to this short text. The first part is the two-fold sayings about tragedies. Some people told Jesus about the Galileans who were killed at worship "whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices". Jesus' immediate response is to ask them whether they believe they suffered and died this way because they were worse sinners. And in case they, or anyone else, might think he was referring to the rough-and-ready, not really 'church people' Galileans, Jesus immediately poses the same question about some Jerusalemites. The two questions, and the sayings that follow ("No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.") are virtually identical, and so the few differences are significant. The mention of both Galileans and Jerusalemites indicates that Jesus is talking about everyone, rural and urban, farmer and financier. Moreover, the first incident, the slaughter of worshippers, deals with a tragedy at the hands of people, the second, the collapse of a tower, refers to a 'natural' disaster. Thus Jesus covers the waterfront, all people are vulnerable to all the violence and suffering that strikes without reason or meaning.

This is not the only time that Jesus presented a new understanding to his followers. In John's gospel we hear the disciples ask him, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?", assuming that there was a direct correlation between sin and suffering. To them, and here, Jesus denied that direct correlation, but still people hold the concept that illness, poverty, disease, loneliness, drug addiction, abuse, even death are the punishments for sins known and unknown.

Christians should know better. The idea that suffering and death are the paybacks for the guilty died at Golgotha, as The One without sin suffered and died on the cross.

The first part of this text forms the "you say ..." part. And then Jesus continues with a parable that is the "but I tell you ..." part. A parable that is simple enough ... just like the poor fig tree, we have another chance to bear fruit. Here is the grace, the mercy of God exemplified, that there is another chance.

But, 'another chance' for what? Why do we need another chance? Well, there are two understandings to that as well. The first is that we need to bear fruit in our faith, that we are called to respond to this miraculous freedom offered in Christ. And what is that response to look like? It begins with accepting the idea that we are free to respond. We are free to lift our heads, to absorb that we are valuable in God's eye, valuable enough for Him to offer us this freedom through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. It is the freedom of that response that makes it so delicious, so meaningful. We are not compelled to lift our voices and our hearts in praise, and so when we do it is all the more pleasing to God. We are not powerless, it is up to us to look at ourselves as works in progress, and we are free to recognize those areas of who we are that do not fit with what we understand will please God ('love, faith, and hope, but the greatest of these is love' is one example), and we are free to turn away from that and turn towards displaying those characteristics and action that please God. That is the powerful message of free will – we are free to disobey God, but we are also free to respond. It is that very freedom that gives meaning to life, and meaning to God's grace. Without that freedom, we are merely puppets, and cannot be held responsible for who we are or how we act.

But with that freedom comes responsibility, the responsibility to respond or not to God's goodness and mercy. In response to the forgiveness that has been offered to us by God in Christ, we are called to repent, to turn away from evil and turn towards the good.

If we have this freedom, what then does it matter if we repent or not? Well, that's answered by the second understanding from this little parable of the fig tree. It is clear that there is a time limit on this offer of freedom, that at some point we will be called to account before God for our response or lack thereof. (That's the point also of the two identical sayings about "unless you repent" in the first part of the reading.) We are not to confuse our freedom with license to do whatever we please, without consequence. We believe (ask those who are in the members class where you will find the definition of what we believe!) that there will come a moment of reckoning, a day when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, and that this too provides meaning to life, and to God's grace.

I guess the confusion among Christians is about the relationship between the cart and the horse. So quickly people want to move to, or return to, a misunderstanding that we can either behave well enough, or believe strongly enough, to somehow deserve to be saved. We can't. We can't either behave well enough nor believe strongly enough to be saved. So thank God that we don't have to. We are already saved through our tiny mustard-seed of faith. We will, through our faith in Christ be presented blameless before God on that day of judgment, when Christ says of us, "this is one of mine."

By the same token we cannot earn our way past that day of judgment through repenting enough, or behaving properly enough. But that's not why we do it. With Christ at our side to give us the strength, the courage, we are able to look at ourselves with honesty, with integrity and see those places where with his help we can change, to become more pleasing to God in response to his mercy and his love.

We can either be paralyzed by this parable, driven to despair that there isn't enough time left to become perfect (as if there was ever time or possibility for that!), or we can hear the message of grace and mercy, a message that says there is still time to bear fruit, that it's not too late to start, that we still have the opportunity to express with our lives our undying thanks to God for his forgiveness in his Son, Christ Jesus our Lord, who died and rose again that we might have this opportunity.