

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**

**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MARCH 24, 2019**

**Psalm Litany**

Based on Psalm 27

The Lord is our light and my salvation; whom shall we fear?

**The Lord is the stronghold of our lives; of whom shall we be afraid?**

One thing we asked of the Lord, that we will seek:

**to live in the house of God's presence all the days of our lives,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in God's temple.**

Let us confess the ways we have abandoned the joy of God and harmed our neighbor:

**you have invited us into your gracious presence as a host taking in guests,  
but we have resisted your invitation and turned aside from the gifts you offer us.**

**Speak to our hearts and make us hungry for the bread of life  
that no other food can satisfy.**

**The Scripture**

Luke 13:1-9

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."*

*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. 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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

**The Message**

***Enough Is Not Nothing***

**Nick Larson**

Life is rife with both promise and peril. Our text today is an oddity, and yet, it speaks with such promise to address what may well be the biggest question of faith today. Why is there so much suffering in the world?

Or to see it more personally, is suffering connected to our behavior?

Does God cause Suffering?

Is suffering or calamity a form of punishment?

Of course, the peril of life is to imagine that we can answer all those questions!

We've all heard so many less-than-helpful (and sometimes downright awful) explanations of suffering, running the gamut from someone saying to explain the death of child that God needed another angel in the heavenly choir to a tv preacher saying that mass shootings are a punishment for some form of moral sin (or perceived sin).

And we understandably want to avoid repeating and perpetuation terrible theological statements.

Yet, we need to remind ourselves that it is never a good idea to base a theology around a single passage of scripture. Having said that, today I want us to examine what we can say about suffering and lose and the cause of evil from this passage.

First, suffering is not a form of punishment. Jesus sharply retorts his disciples and his audience who are asking this very question. His question is a pointed one. Does worse suffering come from being worse sinners? Jesus clearly says it does not.

Just to make sure, Jesus goes on a second movement asking once more, with a second example of folks who were killed when a tower fell on them, and the Jesus asks, "do you think that they were worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem?" again he answers definitely, "No."

Does this mean that suffering is disconnected entirely from our individual and collective sin? No, acts of terror and murderous violence from the likes of Pilate in this text and the New Zealand gunman are horrific actions. And they are sinful. Moreover, what if the tower Jesus references was built by fraudulent contractors? Sin has consequences, and there are all kinds of bad behaviors that contribute to our own misery in the world, and the more we can name, and route out sin the less suffering there will be.

This week there was so much suffering in the news. I read and watched, as I suppose many of you did, of the suffering of victims and families in New Zealand. So many stories, so much violence from this solitary gunman, who carried out this attack on 50 people in two mosques. Such sin, such violence. This is violence like in Christ's day

with Pilate's murdering people and the utter disregard that those victims were combined with the temple sacrifices.

Did you hear of the at least 50 people, who were killed when two commercial buses collided and burst into flames in northern Ghana? Jesus speaks of a tower falling on victims.

What about the Ethiopian plane crash? Or the stories about Cyclone Idai and the victims of this tragic event in Mozambique. The cyclone may have killed more than 1,000 people.

Or the ones a lot closer to home, with the flooding of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers as they continue to wreak havoc on parts of the plains and Midwest. And experts are saying that the flooding could persist for weeks or even months.

Jesus' disciples and those he's traveling with are grumbling to each other, asking: "Is being one of the victims of violence or disaster because you are a worse sinner?"

Which brings us to the most important thing we can say from this passage: **God neither causes nor delights in suffering and tragedy.** If you leave with just one thing today, I want you to hear Jesus' words clearly. He said, "No."

And then this is where the fig tree comes in.

Now, a quick warning: we tend to read this parable allegorically, assuming that the landowner is God and the gardener is Jesus. But nowhere in Luke's gospel do we find a picture of an angry, vindictive God that needs to be placated by a friendly Jesus. Rather, Jesus portrays God as a father who scans the horizon day in and day out waiting for his wayward son to come home. Luke portrays God as a woman, who after sweeping her house all night looking for a lost coin, throws a party costing even more than the coin is worth to celebrate that she found it.

Given this slightly different picture of God's reaction to sin, I wonder if we wouldn't do better to imagine that God is this peculiar gardener, the one so partial to unyielding fig trees. Given Luke's consistent picture of God's reaction to sin, then perhaps the landowner is representative of our *own sense* of how the world should work. So, perhaps it's better to see ourselves as the demanding landowner asking for unyielding trees to be cut down.

So perhaps the gardener is God, the one who consistently raises a contrary voice to suggest that the ultimate answer to sin isn't punishment – not even in the name of justice – but rather mercy, reconciliation, and new life.

In the cross, then, we see just how far God is willing to go to be with us and for us, even to the point of suffering unjustly and dying the death of a criminal. And in the resurrection, we see that God's solidarity and love is stronger than anything, even death.

So, what can we say in the face of suffering and loss? That God is with us. That God understands what our suffering is like. That God has promised to redeem all things, including our suffering. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but somehow, some way. In God's world, suffering and injustice do not have the last word in our lives and the world.

God is inviting us not to be daunted by the headlines we read but rather focused by them on the gifts and good work right in front of us. This text tells us that God is digging around our roots, spreading manure in the hope that we'll blossom and bear fruit. And it tells us that God loves us... loves us... loves you, enough.

It's hard to bear fruit when there's just not much left to give. Jesus, the loving gardener, speaks of the people that God so loves tenderly with unending patience. So much so that even when it appears we will never bear fruit, even when we show no sign of repenting or returning to the One who gave us all we are and hope to be in the first place – even then God would give us one more year!

So, hear me, friends. God doesn't put a deadline on transformation, on fig production, so don't fall into the trap of assuming that the life of faith involves becoming who we inherently are not. Christ is not saying repent or else, he's saying repent and live! He's saying turn towards life so that you can bear figs!

This week, I read a great question from Edward Markquart, which challenged me: "So, what do you need to dig around the roots of your lives and prune yourself so that you can produce fruit?"

Luke constructs the parable of the fig tree with an element of hope. There is still time for the fig tree to bear fruit. There is still time for that seemingly dead thing in your life to bear fruit. You need space, time, and nourishment. And if you aren't getting it, then you can't take the blame for not bearing fruit.

Shame, according to Brene Brown, is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.

Dr. Brown believes shame is not helpful or productive. Shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than a solution or a cure.

In this passage, it is important that you hear Jesus say that we need never feel shame for not bearing fruit. This is the grace of one more year, one more year. Jesus offers to tend to and make space for, nourishment for, and time for growth. While at the same time, Jesus says we need to accept that we already have enough, that enough is not nothing.

That enough is spending the time and energy to aid God in digging around our roots, unclumping our dirt, spreading the manure, and giving ourselves time to bear fruit. We must be brave enough to explore those things within us that are scary so that we can discover the infinite power to produce fruit.

The steps to do that gardening work is the willingness and capacity to be vulnerable. We must find a willingness to be imperfect, to be vulnerable. It's about the courage to wake up in the morning and acknowledge that no matter what gets done and what doesn't get done, that I am enough, and that I am worthy of love, belonging and joy.

The opposite of it is scarcity: I'm not enough. Yet, Christ promises you that you are enough, and enough is not nothing. Christ calls each of us to lives where we are courageous enough to expect more than nothing. We aren't called to a need to be perceived as completely in control, completely certain, risking no emotional exposure. That's the equivalent of an emotional straightjacket; I've got everything managed. That's stoicism, not exposure.

Shame stops most of us from producing fruit. We are blocked by ignoring our and the capacity of others to create, to bring about fruitfulness in the world.

Brene Brown offers three things we can do to break the shame spiral. We can break that spiral by talking to ourselves like you talk to someone you love. You can reach out to someone you trust, and tell your story. You must learn what triggers shame for you. You can reality-check your fears, tell your story, and speak shame. Shame cannot survive being spoken.

In this story, Jesus is speaking to those who are panicking over the violence and tragedy of their world. And Jesus tells this fig parable to touch the panic inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them. They are terrified by those things – for good reason. They have searched their hearts and any bait that might bring disaster sniffing their way. They have lain awake at night making lists of their mistakes.

While Jesus does not honor their illusion that they can protect themselves in this way, he does seem to honor the vulnerability that their fright has opened up in them. It's not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark – not if it makes them turn towards the light.

Rev. Barbara Lundbald says, “Being scared to death can rob us of all hope.” Life can seem utterly arbitrary – if I die, I die. There’s nothing I can do about it so why try? Into the midst of such despair, the gardener comes.

Don’t cut down the tree. Let it alone for one more year. Jesus, the gardener, wants us to live. His passion is marked for us by great urgency – don’t wait! Look at your life and dare to ask the hard questions: Am I stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs?

Am I so busy making a living that I’ve forgotten to make a life?

Jesus digs at us with questions like these, such questions, like the parable of the fig tree, moving us towards repentance.

God whose love in our lives challenges us and enables us to live without all the answer, without answers to why there is such murderous gun violence, and horrific disasters, is a God who is willing to dig around our hearts, patiently encouraging us toward repentance, and faithfulness, and fruitfulness.

We may not get all the answers to why there is suffering in the world, but we get a God who has given God’s whole life to us, so that we might come to learn how to give our lives to God more fully.

“So, who knows?” asks the gardener. “Could this be the year for figs?”