

March 24, 2019

3rd Sunday in Lent

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Luke 13:1-9



Photo by Gretchen Huber, "The Gardner's Path"

Where's the Fruit?

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came looking for fruit on it but found none. He said to the man who looked after the vineyard, 'Look here, for three years now I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and finding none. Cut it down; why should it be taking up the ground?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it one more year and give me time to dig round it and manure it; it may bear fruit next year, if not then you can cut it down.' Luke 13:6-9

She sat with her head in her hands. I wasn't surprised that she couldn't look at me. If she had I would have seen her rage. It was justified and fine by me, but she didn't feel comfortable showing it. She was angry --with God.

"I can't believe it." Then she said over and over and over again. "Why? What in the world have I done to deserve all this?"

The details of her situation don't really matter. We've all been there, or we love someone who has. Tragedy strikes and we are left wondering about God's role in all of this. How can a good God allow so many bad things --a Roman attack on worshipers in Galilee, the 18 who died when the Tower of Siloam fell, the massacre in Christchurch, catastrophic flooding in Africa and the Midwest, the Ethiopian air disaster. Terrible things happen, and we are left with our heads in our hands asking, "Why?"

For thousands of years believing people have asked the same question. Job asked God,

Why have you made me your target?ⁱ

Job's friends assumed, as we all do sometimes, that bad things happen because of someone's fault. "There must be a reason for this." We tell ourselves. "Someone has to be responsible." We blame ourselves; we blame leadership; we blame the victims, and finally, we blame God.

William Sloan Coffin, the great preacher of the last century, was senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York when his son died in a car accident. It was a rainy night when 24-year-old, Alex lost control of his car and careened off the road into the icy waters of Boston Harbor.

Following the tragedy Dr. Coffin preached a sermon. He thanked all the people for their messages of condolence, for food brought to the house, for an arm on the shoulder when no

words would do, but he also raged...raged against the well-meaning friends who implied that Alex's death was God's will. "I knew the anger would do me good," he said.

"Do you think it was God's will that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper...that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple ... too many? Do you think it was God's will that there are no street lights along that stretch of the road and no guard rail separating the road and the harbor? The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' We never know enough to say that."

Here is how he concluded his remarks. Coffin said:

"My own consolation lies in knowing that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."ⁱⁱ

I wish Jesus had said that to the people who told him about Pilate's vengeful act against the Galileans who were making sacrifices. I wish he had told them something like that regarding the collapse of the tower near the pool of Siloam, but he didn't.

Instead, he talked about repentance. He asked:

Do you think that the Galileans who suffered ... were worse sinners than other Galileans? ... And the people who died when the tower fell, were they worse offenders than everyone else living in Jerusalem?

Then he answered his own question:

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will perish just as they did.

What? Really, Jesus? That seems to contradict what you usually say when people ask the difficult question, "Why?" Remember that day on the road when you and your disciples encountered a man who was born blind? The disciples asked:

Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?

This idea that it has to be somebody's fault was deeply engrained in their thinking. Sometimes it's the same for us. We want to control the chaos in our lives. We want to feel empowered. We want to understand! But Jesus was adamant on this point. Pointing to the blind man, he said:

*Neither this man nor his parents sinned! He was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him.*ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, Jesus said, this man born blind is no one's fault, he is exceptionally made. He is perfect and gifted, because he has an opportunity to reveal the work of God that others do not. He's a mirror to the glory of God.

At the same time there are some things that happen that are the result of human error. For example, 2,500 people in the developing world die every day of hunger and malnutrition, most of them children. There are reasons for that: war, corruption, and hoarding of resources by the first world. Hurricanes, floods, and tsunamis increase as the planet warms. Gun violence, drugs, and human trafficking devastate communities and kill millions. We might want to separate all that from the reality of our sin, but we can't. Listen to Jesus' warning! Unless we repent, we will perish, just as they do.

There is always a reckoning. Jesus wants us to pay attention – not only to what Pilate did, but also what we do, or fail to do, individually and as a society. Look at the quality of your own lives. Consider your impact, he tells us. Are you contributing to the solution, or just complaining about the problems? Where do you and I need to notice our errors and turn and go a different way? That's repentance.

It's worth noting that in the whole previous section of Luke, Jesus had been talking with them about the cost of discipleship, what is required of a people who want to follow him. Some of them just weren't getting it – they wanted the Christian life to be transactional -- you do good things, you get good things. Jesus told them it didn't work that way. He said...you were made to bear fruit; we were all made to bear good fruit for God's kingdom...good fruit that will nourish the people and advance God's kingdom on earth. Unless you turn from your striving and blaming and rely fully on God, you will perish, just as they did.

We know that this message is urgent because whenever Jesus wants to make a vital point, he tells a story. This one is about a fig tree. Fig trees are everywhere in the Middle East. They grow wonderfully in that climate. Remember the clothes Adam and Eve were said to have made for themselves out of leaves? Those were fig leaves. Basically all you have to do is stick a fig tree in the ground, and it will grow up to 30 feet tall and produce three crops a year.

Jesus' first hearers would have clearly understood the fig tree to be more than that. From ancient times the fig tree was a symbol for Israel, God's people, their own community. The man with the fruitless tree is God, and the tree, that's you and me.

So this is a parable of judgement then? Judgement on those off doing their own thing, like the one about the 10 bridesmaids who weren't prepared when the bridegroom came, or that fig tree that made only pineapples. Cut it down!

But wait! That's not the end of the story. There's another important character in this parable... the gardener wants to save this tree (you and me.) "Give it another year," he says, "let me dig around the roots and put manure on it."

And, there it is...there's the gospel, the good news! This is not a parable of judgement, it's a parable of grace. The tree is getting another chance! We are all getting another chance!

The manure business, that's another sermon. Everyone has fallow seasons, maybe even "manure years" like those times when the Tower of Siloam falls on you, figuratively speaking; those times when there are troubles in your family or community, or at school, or work, or with

your health. Manure years can be very fruitful, generous seasons...or they can be times when we need to take instead of giving. There's an important stewardship in receiving.

This parable is about the stewardship of giving, and what God expects from you and me. You can be glad that your gifts to God at Woods bear fruit in thousands of ways. When you share the fruit of your labor here at Woods, children, youth and adults hear the good news of Jesus and learn to love him and follow him. The homeless are housed, the hungry are fed, the sick and aging receive care. People discover self-sufficiency through the ministry of this church. Woods is bearing good fruit – we are transforming lives and society by the power of Jesus Christ, and your involvement in all of that is the fruit that God desires.

It's not a transaction (do good and get good); I'm not saying that. But this parable makes it clear that good stewardship, proper stewardship brings serious rewards, and poor stewardship has serious consequences.

So, think about it this week. Jesus compared you and me to trees in God's garden. Is God delighted or disappointed with the fruit you are bearing? Do I need a little manure spread around me? Do you? Is there some repentance, some change of direction that will allow you to be more fruitful, more generous?

Back in the 1980's Wendy's restaurants had a TV commercial. Clara Peller, age 81 and about 4 feet tall, took a long look at the other guy's hamburger and asked, "Where's the beef?" Someday, maybe today, Jesus will ask you and me, "Where's the fruit?"

Would you pray with me?

Patient God, there are many things we don't understand, but this one thing we do know, you care for us and provide for our needs. Thank you for giving us the gift of today, and for trusting us enough to make us your emissaries in our own community and around the world. Fill us up with your spirit and help us to bear good fruit for you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ Job 7:20

ⁱⁱ William Sloan Coffin, "Alex's Death" *PBS NOW* www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript_eulogy_print.html

ⁱⁱⁱ John 9:3