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March 7, 2010 3rd Sunday of Lent, Year C

THE FIG TREE AND SECOND CHANCES Luke 13:1-9 Cursing of the Fig Tree

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE? No one offers a satisfactory answer. For whatever reason, bad things happen, even to good people.

Luke 13 opens with some people asking Jesus about the Galileans who were murdered by soldiers in the temple by order of Pilate. The blood of martyrs mingled with the blood of their bulls. Historians tell us that much to the horror of the Jews Pilate confiscated money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct to improve Jerusalem's water supply. When the angry Jewish mobs gathered, Pilate instructed his soldiers to wear cloaks over their battle gear and to mingle among the crowd at the temple. At a given signal they were to attack the mob and disperse them. The soldiers did so, but the mob violence got out of hand and many people were killed.

Did these people die because they were worse sinners than the rest of the crowd? The questions asked of Jesus seemed to suggest that was the case, at least in the minds of the questioners. Jesus replies that this was not punishment for something they did or did not do. You may as well ask why the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile killed some people and not others.

Jesus warns those who question him, "unless you repent you too will all perish."

Asked about the deaths of the eighteen people killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them, Jesus repeats, they did not die this way as punishment for something they did or did not do. Had the eighteen hired on as laborers building Pilate's aqueducts? If so, any wages they earned belonged to God and they should have deposited the money in the temple treasury to repay what had been stolen from God. Some folks inferred that the tower had fallen on them because they had collaborated with Pilate. Were their deaths then God's judgment on those who compromised themselves with the enemy? Were they worse sinners and so deserved death? Jesus responds that no matter what happened, or how it happened, it wasn't a judgment from God.

It's easy to demonize our opponents – to assume they are worse than we are, to assume that somehow they deserve to suffer, deserve misfortune, deserve to die. Don't make sense out of senseless events by blaming the victims, Jesus says; or by suggesting that God has brought about their death as punishment. By that standard none of us should be alive – for Romans 3:23 reminds us "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" If God wanted to kill people because they are evil, who would remain?

Don't make sense out of the senseless by condemning the victims and assuming it's their fault, Jesus says, but rather we should consider our own sinfulness, our own mortality, and then work to produce fruit consistent with our salvation before we are called to judgment someday.

Human tragedy is NOT always punishment for sin. Some things just happen as a consequence of natural law -- and consequences happen to the best of people. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods sweep away the property of the poor and the rich. Automobile wrecks kill Christian and non-Christians. Christians die of disease too. Some things just happen. Sometimes you're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some things in life we just can't control.

Don't bog down over things you CAN'T control, concern yourself with things you CAN control. Quit worrying about the evil in Pilate, Jesus says; look at yourself. Quit debating the evil of those murdered in the temple and those killed at Siloam. Instead, take responsibility for making sure GOOD things happen. On judgment day we will not be asked what life did to us, but what we did with life!

PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE

Jesus then told the parable of the fig tree, again emphasizing: "Unless you repent, you will perish." The purpose of the fig tree is to bear fruit, and the owner of the tree is furious at the lack of productivity. For three years he has come in search of fruit and found none. Cut this tree down, he says. There is nothing wrong with this, in fact, if gardens are to be productive, nonbearing trees are pruned or removed.

But the vinedresser defends the tree and asks that the tree be given another chance. Give it another year, and with the vinedresser's help, it should bear fruit. Apparently it's the vinedresser, not the owner, who's been attending to the tree all along. The owner came looking for results and is upset to find none, but the vinedresser is the one who has dealt everyday with the fig tree. You would expect the vinedresser to be the one annoyed, even angry, at the failure of his own efforts, and yet he is the one who asks for more time and promises more effort to get the tree to become productive and thereby save it from destruction!

What insight into God and Jesus are you gaining through this parable? The preceding stories of the people killed by Pilate and by the tower of Siloam emphasize the opportunity for repentance and the choice of life over death. If the owner of the fig tree is God, and the vinedresser is Jesus, is Jesus telling a parable about the judgment of God and the persistence of Jesus? What role does repentance play, given that the tree cannot amend its own conditions and must depend on the help of the vinedresser?

Is Jesus not promising to help us?

Is Jesus not giving us yet another chance to repent?

Is not Christianity a religion of Second Chances?

By a show of hands, when you think of God's dealing with us, which you think is the most important word between judgment and grace?

How many vote "judgment?"

How many vote "grace?"

How many don't want to vote? ☺

Let me repeat the question, when you think of God's dealing with us, which you think is the most important word **between** judgment...AND...grace? Yes,..."AND!"

God is a holy God, a just God, who judges our sin unacceptable. But God is also a God of GRACE who loves you so much that he suffers his one penalty for your sin, satisfies his own need for justice, and now is justified in setting you free to begin again. God gives you second chances, even third and fourth and fifth chances to do what is right, to get it straight, to do that which is pleasing to God! But, when all is said and done, you must face a time of reckoning.

The fig tree gets a second chance and vinedresser pledges renewed efforts to help the tree, but be forewarned - the tree's owner will be back again to look for fruit. Yes, Jesus is our helper, but we are still to bear fruit.

Fruit trees, whether apple or pear, or peach, or orange, or pecan trees; trees that don't bear fruit aren't allowed the luxury to remain just because they look good. The gardener has the right and the responsibility to judge unproductive trees and to cut them down to make way for new fruit. The owner and the tree depend on the gardener's skills.

This parable tells us that Jesus is willing to try one more time to help us become productive Christians. Jesus is confident in his ability to do what is best for us. We are given time to get things straight, given the care and attention, the raking and fertilizer and nourishment that a good gardener gives to his plants and trees to enable us to be fruitful. But we don't have forever to get our act together; eventually God will inspect his garden and pronounce judgment on us.

We cannot answer whether or not other people's deaths make sense,
 Or whether or not they deserved death in the time and way it came to them,
 But we can and must answer whether or not our lives make any difference,
 Whether or not we are fruitful for God
 Whether or not we are ready to meet our maker.

WHAT HAPPENED?

So tell me, what became of the fig tree? Did the year of grace and fertilization bring repentance and new growth? Or did they cut down the tree? We don't know. Parables do not answer themselves - they demand an answer, a response, from you, the listener.

Jesus repeatedly gives us chances to repent and begin to live correctly. But he also warns us: Don't press your luck -- repent while you may, before the axe of judgment is laid to our roots.

God is patient. God is forgiving. But we must take responsibility for our own actions, or inaction. We are responsible for bearing fruit and making life better where we live, and go to school, and work, and play. We are not responsible for people beyond our control, but we can't plead innocence when we have not tried to control ourselves and to correct situations we know are wrong.

Nor can we be what H. G. Wells calls "Goodness Sakers," i.e., people who see something that obviously needs doing, or see some social evil, or some moral short-coming, and they wring their hands and say, "For goodness sakes, why doesn't somebody do something about this?"

It is WE who have been called to do something. We can't explain why there is hunger in the world, but we CAN do our part to feed people where we live. We can't explain WHY good people are struck down by disease or grief or prejudice or economics, but we CAN be there to comfort the afflicted left behind and to afflict the comfortable people and systems that maintain the oppressive status quo.

Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "Let each person sweep in front of his own door, and then the whole world will be clean." Alone we can do little, but together we can do GREAT things. We cannot do all things, but what things we CAN do we MUST do.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO RESPOND

The owner of the barren fig tree said "Cut it down; why should it use up ground?" The vinedresser answered, "Give it another year, sir. Let me put fertilizer around it and if it bears fruit, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Lent is a time of renewal. Jesus is the Lord of second chances. Woe to us if we never apply ourselves! Uselessness and indifference invite disaster; the perils of the fruitless life are real. But Jesus offers us another chance and a better way.

Are you bearing fruit for Christ in your jobs, in your homes, in our community, in serving Christ? We are not called to be something we are not. The fig tree was not called to bear bananas or oranges or mangos. What Christ asks of us is that we allow him to help us be the best we can be and do that which we can do.

The fig tree makes it clear that God gives us a second chance and a third and a fourth ...but someday we'll be given one final chance. And if we pass up that chance, it won't be that God has shut us out, but we by our own stubborn choice have shut ourselves out of the kingdom.

Heaven forbid it, may God save us from that!

There is still time. Repent and begin anew with God today! AMEN.

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