

March 7, 2001 – Lent 3

The Rev. Canon Bob Riegel

Luke 13:1-9

Last Sunday Charles Davis preached a strong and challenging sermon. Some people said it had a bit of fire and brimstone in it. He did make it very clear that we are all sinners. He made a good distinction between how we tend to focus on morality rather than sin. Morality lists things we must do and things we not must do. Many of us have a tendency to judge ourselves and others by such moral rules. Since we can always find many others who are less moral than we are, we can be satisfied with ourselves and very judgmental of others. Sin is something quite different. St. Paul said that he had kept over 600 Jewish moral laws, but still did not feel right with God. Sin has to do with our relationship with God. Sin indicates that there is separation, even alienation, between ourselves and the loving God. When we say that Jesus was without sin we mean that he in his life he was not separated from God. However, he and his disciples were accused and did break moral laws of the Sabbath day and dietary rules.

Sin is the condition of all humanity. And because we are separated from the loving God, we cannot be fully loving toward others, or toward ourselves. We cannot really be at peace with ourselves or with others.

There is a powerful theme in Judaism that has been carried into much of Christian thinking. It is that bad things happen to bad people – that calamities can be expected to happen to sinners. That God will get you. If nothing very bad has happened to me it must mean that I am not much of a

sinner. A great many of us hope to find some safety and security in saying that terrible things happen only to terrible people. But from the days of Job in the Old Testament, and from the life and cross of Jesus, and from our own experience today, we know that very bad things can happen to very good people.

The events of the world cause many of us to hide away in dread, to shrink back from joyful living, to have fear and death be the ultimate concern and power in our lives.

In the Gospel account just read people told Jesus about Galileans who were killed by Pontius Pilate even as they were offering sacrifices in the Temple. And Jesus said, "Do you imagine that because these Galileans suffered this fate they were greater sinners than anyone else in Galilee? I tell you they were not. But unless you repent, you will all come to the same end." There had also been an accident in Siloam where a tower fell killing 18 people. Jesus said, "Do you imagine that they were more guilty than people living in Jerusalem? I tell you they were not, but unless you repent, you will all of you come to the same end."

The easy, and I think the careless and incorrect way to interpret this is to suggest that Jesus was in effect saying, "If you don't stop sinning God will also get you. Repent or die." I know that is preached in many churches today. I know that many people strangely want to believe that. But that is not the Good News of Jesus Christ, and I do not believe it is what he is saying in this passage.

Remember that he is making the point that the people whom Pilate killed and the people on whom the tower fell were not worse sinners than others. These terrible things were not a consequence of their sin. Such things just happen without regard to the goodness or badness of a person.

I believe what Jesus is saying is that the real tragedy is that these people died without ever really living - they died without repenting - they died, in a word living in constant dread that some day something terrible would happen to them. And of course it did. The tragedy is not the accident itself. The tragedy is that they died without having been fully alive, living in the presence of God, bearing fruit and knowing the joy of being loved by God and loving God and others. Jesus knows that all the people to whom he is speaking will someday die. He is really asking, "Will you die without having lived - Will you die without repenting - without turning from fears and dread – to God – and to life and hope?" All of us are sinners and that means that in some way we have separated ourselves from God. All of us are sinners which means that all of us need to repent – repent – that is turn around and accept in this life the grace and love and peace that can come only from God. We do not repent just to get into heaven. To repent is to get right with God now. To repent is to say yes to God the Father for the marvelous creation of us and the world in which we live. To repent is to say yes to Christ and accept the oneness with God made possible by his life, death and resurrection. To repent is to say yes to the Holy Spirit who has promised to be with us always and lead us into a blessed, peaceful, loving life.

This Lent, then, is a time for us to examine each and everything we do. To plan our life and action always asking if in this or that we are saying yes or no to God.

The parable of the fig tree which closes the Gospel reading was about a fig tree that had not yet done what a fig tree was created to do. Bear fruit, be fruitful. Should it be cut down and destroyed? The answer is no it should be fed and nurtured so that hopefully it will have the life that was given to it. That is what Jesus wants for all of us. That before we die we will be fully alive and fruitful - that I will be the person God created me to be.

I have told some of you before about Furman student came to my office during Holy Week. She was well named Gloria. She began to tell me her story and I was stunned. A year before her fiancée had been killed at a railway crossing. Her brother and sister were flying home to be with her when their plane crashed and they were both killed. Now less than a year later she had gotten the news that her remaining sister was dying of cancer. There was literally nothing I could say, no word of comfort was spoken. I was stunned into silence and we sat there for several minutes in silence. Then she almost screamed, "No, I will not let the world win. I will not be a bitter, angry, half-alive thing. It has got to mean something that Jesus died for us all. I choose him." And she got up and left.

On Easter morning she came up to receive Communion and her face was radiant. She was so alive, so victorious, so unafraid, that I knew without a doubt that Christ was alive - and was alive in her.

Christ has given to each one of us the opportunity to live here on earth as we would live in heaven. He calls us away from our fixation, our terror over all the terrible things - calls us to know his peace, his joy, his hope, his fullness of life. On earth as in heaven - that prayer we say over and over often without much thought - means that Christ has thrust heaven into earth, we can claim heaven now, we can claim victory now. We can repent before we die. We can choose to live, to really live before we die.