

Sunday, March 24, 2019
Third Sunday in Lent (Year C)
Luke 13.1-9
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

During the past week, I have figuratively walked with a dear friend and cherished colleague who has been dealing with a pastoral crisis in a family in his congregation in Honolulu. Back in November, the daughter and granddaughter of his parishioners were tragically killed in a house fire. An utterly devastating event in the life of this family. Finally, about six weeks ago, there was some joy for them. Their son, the brother of the woman who had been killed, got married. But then, a week ago today, tragedy struck again. The son—the young man who had recently gotten married—was on a fishing boat 24 miles south of O’ahu. He had just caught a large ono. While posing for the obligatory picture with his prized catch, the fish managed to jump back into the ocean, pulling the young man overboard. He became entangled in the lure, still connected to the fish, and was pulled under the waves, which were higher and choppier than normal. For several days, the Coast Guard and scores of Good Samaritans performed search and rescue operations, hoping to find the young man. Sadly, to no avail. The Coast Guard called off all search and rescue procedures Wednesday evening. Monday night, as my friend sat at the pier with his parishioners, waiting for the rescue boats to return from the second day of searching, the father of the young man—the father of the woman who died in the fire, the grandfather of the girl who died in the fire—said to my friend, “our family must be cursed.”

How often, in the midst of tragedy—particularly in those times when we are beset by one tragedy after another—do we find ourselves thinking the same thing? I must be cursed. I must have done something wrong. God must be punishing me for something I did.

That is the tone behind our Gospel reading for today. Some people come to Jesus and tell him about some Galileans who were slaughtered by Pontius Pilate’s soldiers as they were presenting their sacrifices in the temple. As a result, the blood of those slaughtered was mixed with the blood of the sacrificial animals, desecrating it. Jesus reads between the lines and recognizes that those conveying the incident were implying that those who were slaughtered must have suffered because “they were worse sinners than all other Galileans” (Lk 13.2). He then brings up another tragic incident, in which the tower of Siloam collapsed, killing 18 people. Jesus then asks, “do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” (Lk 9.4). Both of these tragic events illustrate the commonly held notion of Jesus’ day—and often times, even in our own day—that illness, misfortune, even tragedy, are God’s Divine punishment for sin. But even more, he is seeking to disabuse the implication on the part of those bearing bad news that since disaster had not befallen them, they did not need to be concerned with Divine judgment.

What we see going on here is the human response to the inexplicable. That we humans have a hard time admitting that anything, particularly a disastrous event, is beyond our control. We need explanations. We need answers. And if we cannot readily find those answers, we turn to blame as a means of assuaging our discomfort with the fact that we are vulnerable to the unknown.

In response to both of these tragedies, Jesus addresses the implications regarding the sinfulness of those who suffered loss of life and the lack of sinfulness on the part of those who had not experienced tragedy. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” A seemingly harsh response. One that might, on the surface, seem to validate rather than refute the implication that those who suffered somehow deserved what befell them. That those who had not suffered tragedy were more favored in the eyes of God.

Lest we are tempted to look with disdain on those who held such beliefs—considering them as more primitive than we are—we need to remember that there are still those who hold similar beliefs, who say similar things, today. Those who claim that a disease, or a hurricane, or some other natural disaster or accident is Divine punishment for some other people’s sins. If only THOSE people had not sinned. If only they prayed more. If only they had more faith. Of course, it’s always someone else’s sins and not their own that are being punished. But Jesus says, “NO! That’s not how God works.” And Jesus goes on to tell a parable to illustrate just how God DOES work.

In this parable, the owner of a vineyard wants to have a fig tree cut down—a fig tree that thus far has failed to produce fruit. The gardener, however, sees potential in the unproductive fig tree. So he implores his master to give him just one year to work on the tree and see if he can cause growth to occur, cause fruit to come forth.

The intent behind the parable is straightforward. God is the gardener. And each of us is like the fig tree. God is patient and merciful, willing to work with us, to work on us, no matter who we are or what we have done or not done. In hopes that what has been lacking will be provided and will result in new growth. That we will respond to the love and mercy provided and will turn around—repent—and chose growth. That we will chose new life. Particularly in light of Jesus’ warning of the need for repentance, this parable is a much-needed reminder of God’s infinite love, of God’s unbounded grace and mercy, of God’s unending patience with us. Of God’s desire to bring not death and destruction but to give life.

As evidenced in the telling of the parable about the gardener and the fig tree, Jesus does not agree with the perspective that some are irretrievably lost. Not that anyone can avoid their own demise by repenting. For all of us one day will surely die. Rather, Jesus uses the perceptions of those present as an opportunity to talk about God’s loving mercy for all his creation. That by repenting—by turning their lives around—they will not avoid physical death, but they will have the opportunity for abundant life in this age. And that they will ultimately have eternal life. That the end of life will not be the end, but will be the beginning of something new.

The implied message that Jesus seeks to convey is that whether the tragedies suffered at the hands of Pilate’s soldiers or in the collapse of the tower of Siloam, regardless of whether such tragedies are due to intentional human actions or due to an accident, these deaths occurred without warning. And while the deaths were indeed a tragedy, the real tragedy is that these victims had no opportunity to repent. It is a reminder that life is so precious and yet so precarious, that repentance must not be put off to some later date. Whenever we fail to live as

God desires, we must take the opportunity to repent as soon as we recognize the need for a course correction. That repentance must be an ongoing part of life.

Another important implication of this parable is that “while we are ultimately accountable for our own actions, we are not alone. Just as the gardener tended to the fig tree, God will be with us, and will forgive and renew us. In response, we are to be more responsible, productive, and compassionate in God’s service” (*Synthesis*, Lent 3, 3/24/19).

This is one of the key themes behind our annual commemoration of Lent. Recognizing our own weakness and sinfulness. Recognizing that we do not always bear the good fruit that God desires for us. So as a result, we are in need of repentance. That repentance is always a way of life for Christians. And that God is always there, supporting us in our efforts to turn our lives around. That God has unbounded love and mercy for us and is willing to take that extra time to help us in our turning and in our growing, so that we have the opportunity for the new life that he wishes for all his beloveds.

Of course, repentance requires that we first take an honest look at our own lives, at our own actions. And that even though we may not like what we see—because we don’t like what we see—that we be willing to do the hard work of admitting our wrongs to ourselves, but more importantly, to God. And that we turn toward him, knowing we don’t—that we can’t—do this on our own. Repentance is a profound act of faith. For repentance requires the acknowledgement and the trust that God is there. That God will provide the strength and the courage we need to turn around. That God can and does redeem us, setting us on the right path. That God can and does make us whole, preparing us for the new life—here and now, and beyond—that is ours for the taking.

In the parable of the gardener and the fig tree, the gardener asks for just one more year in which to care for the tree. The interesting thing about the parable is that we are not told the outcome. We do not know what happens after the allotted year. Does the tree bloom? Is it cut down? We just don’t know the fig tree’s fate. But what we do hear loud and clear is the hope and the promise of the gardener’s intention. We hear of the gardener’s determination to do all he can to turn things around—to avoid death and to bring forth life. We hear of the gardener’s patience, love, and mercy, even in the midst of the uncertainty of life.

What we do know is that we have the opportunity to determine our own ending. We get to choose what happens to the fig tree that represents us. We can choose to blame what happens to us on a mistaken notion of God’s judgment. In which case we ultimately wither and die. Or we can choose to recognize that ours is a patient, loving, and merciful God who wants nothing more than for us to have life and to have it abundantly. And if we are able to recognize the latter, we begin to see that our part in the narrative is to turn toward him and allow him to love and nurture us so that we indeed do bloom and bear fruit, no matter what the world may throw at us. For ours is not to try to explain why things happen the way they do. Ours is to trust in God to be with us in the midst of what happens—good or bad—and to help us to grow into who we are created and called to be, if we just let him.

And the family experiencing their pastoral crisis? There is a postscript to their story. Last night, at the Saturday evening service, my friend baptized his parishioners' younger son. Despite what happened to his sister, his niece, and his brother—or maybe because of it—he was able to see beyond the fallacy of judgement or curse. Even in dark times, he was able to see God's unbounded love and mercy shining forth, and chose to turn toward God. Just one more demonstration of what Christ proved in going to the cross for us, of what he proved in his resurrection. That even in the midst of tragedy and death, there is indeed new life.