

3/24/19

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

**GOSPEL**

*Luke 13:1–9*

*Jesus addresses the age-old question of whether people deserve the bad things that happen to them. The short answer is "No." Yet, it is better to repent than to test the forbearance of God indefinitely.*

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>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? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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?' <sup>8</sup>He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Many are familiar with the story of the disciples James and John, and how their positioning for honor with Jesus led to a rift within all of the disciples concerning who deserved what, and who was better than the other. Jesus uses the dispute to teach about true leadership, saying whom ever is the better among you, must be servant of all. Today in our Gospel lesson, we have the same sort of issue, but instead of the question being "who is the best?" the question, at its basic level, is more like "who is the worst?" Today is one of the few in which we hear the underlying question of – why do bad things happen?

In the passage, we have Jesus in a familiar spot of teaching the crowds, when a group of people arrives to give Jesus news about a terrible and grotesque act committed under the rule of Pilate. Pilate has again had the Roman guards slaughter innocent people, but this time they take the blood from the Jews and mingle it with the blood that the Jews offered as a sacrifice to God. This is one of the many repulsive acts that Pilate was said to have done to insult and offend the Jews. When these people come with this news to Jesus, they probably came to hear of his reaction. Would he rail out against the Romans? Would this lead to some type of riot led by Jesus? How would he make sense of this tragedy? Jesus responds by asking them a question that most people who have ever lived in this world have asked in some type of way. He says, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than any others, that this should happen to them?" in other words, he asks the crowd, if somehow these people deserved for this, was God giving them their just punishment for their behavior. And Jesus' answer is very clear, in fact he emphasizes it twice when he answers: "No, I tell you."

Jesus does not stop there. In fact he goes on to compare the incident with another recent accident that the people seem to know about. He tells about a construction accident at Siloam, when apparently a tower fell down and killed eighteen people there. Again he questions, "Do you suppose that they were more guilty than all the other people living in Jerusalem?" "No, I tell you." A major belief at that time in history, and also still prevalent today is that the bad things that happen in life because God is getting back at us for our failures. In another episode in the gospels, the disciples come across a blind man and they ask Jesus: "Did the blind man sin, or was it his parents?" Again, Jesus attempts to point out that this is not the way God acts in our world. Jesus is pointing out to the crowd, that even though Pilate's act was intentional, it was not God's revenge that these people were killed, anymore than it was God's punishment that the tower fell down on some others.

A famous Baptist theologian Will Campbell told about a story about sitting in a bar, somewhere in the South with his friend, when a man came into the bar with some big news for everybody. Just a few minutes ago there had been a shooting. A criminal had killed a sheriff. Upon hearing the news, Campbell says that his friend turned and asked him, "Now whom does God love more - the sheriff or the criminal?" Campbell's response was basically that we are all sinners, but God loves us anyway.

Jesus is telling the people that in this life, God does not punish us, by causing terrible things to happen to us. Someone does not die in a tragedy because the week before they did something that did not measure up in the eyes of God. Instead, Jesus concentrates more on pointing out that life is fragile, so get your priorities set in the present and do not put things off.

We are equal in the eyes of God. And while that may be a comfort to some, for others it causes distress, for perhaps deep inside of us we want to believe that because we are people of the faith, people of the Gospel, we somehow get preferential treatment. But in this life, that is not so.

"Expecting life to treat you well, because you are a good person," someone once said, "is like expecting an angry bull not to charge you because you are a vegetarian." Certainly, it seems, it would be a lot easier if people, visibly and immediately, who did deeds of faith got rewarded, and those who were unbelievers got punished. Maybe we think, it would help people "straighten up and fly right," but the truth is, is that we all fall short of perfection. And that if, we indeed, were truly judged by all our thoughts and deeds, we would each quickly recognize the need for God's forgiveness and God's grace.

God sees each of us as a unique creation. God also sees through, and looks past, our inadequacies and failures. God equally stands besides and cares for everyone. Our challenge is to look for the positive as well, knowing that at times it will be very hard. While often we can understand this on an intellectual basis, when tragic events break into our lives, it is sometimes hard to handle it faithfully. It is easier, often in subtle ways, to feel and believe that God is getting me back.

It is also often difficult to think that God loves someone who does horrid things the same as us. This does not mean however, that God doesn't care about those terrible things, nor does it really give us an answer as to why these tragic things happen. But perhaps another question we can ask ourselves is: "why is it that we feel the unfairness of life only when things come crashing in around us? Why not question the

fairness of life when we are benefiting; when we are the ones having days when we feel we are on top of the world? Most of us will go to tonight will have a warm bed to crawl into, most of us tonight will not go to bed wondering if we will eat tomorrow, most of us don't give a second thought that we can have a safe glass of water to drink. It is too easy to look at God and see what we do not have, then to look at God to see what great blessings we have been given. A term that is getting a lot of traction these days is "neighbor justice;" meaning we often view the acts of justice in our lives from only our own perspective. "Neighbor justice," reminds us to step back and see how it affects others around us. This is especially hard in the midst of the toughest struggles in our lives, however, God understands that.

Writer Philip Yancey says: "Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse." "Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse."

We are called to trust in God's promises. Trust that somehow, someday it may make sense to us. In the meantime we are called to be disciples of action in this world, not to spare ourselves from tragedy, but instead to reach out to others, with the good news of the empty tomb, that points us to a new reality, a reality that God will have the final say, and in that we can find comfort, hope and healing. Amen.