

3 Lent
Christ and Grace
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Luke 13:1-9
March 24, 2019

The disciples and the crowd are following Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem. Along the way they share with him the recent news stories. You know, they talk about things they've heard and they wonder what will happen next. They consider why things happened and what they meant in the context of their lives as followers of Jesus. Not much has changed, has it?

We are bombarded with news, 24/7 if we want it. Part of me wishes I could hear news by word of mouth while walking along a tree-lined path like the disciples did. Somehow I think it might be more tolerable. I long ago stopped watching the news on television. It is too graphic, too much sensory overload, too unsettling for me. I have to take it in small bits on the written page, or on the radio where I can control the volume and avoid images of violence and suffering. This week people are grieving, still, the shooting of worshipers in New Zealand. Mozambique has been devastated by a cyclone and flooding. Nebraska farms are underwater and cattle are cut off from their food supply if they were not washed away in the waters. The flooding continues downstream. Who sinned? The New Zealanders worshipping Allah (who is the One God, the same God we worship)? The people of Mozambique? The Nebraska farmers?

When we hear of disasters, suffering, or horrifying headlines, whether they are national news headlines or the messy stuff of our personal lives, we often feel hopeless, fearful, and uncertain. There have always been news headlines and there have always been people all too ready to explain why bad things happen to good people. Because if we can explain it, then it doesn't seem so random. If we can make sense of chaos we think we are in some way controlling it, and that we can prevent it from happening to us. We want a formula that will prevent bad things.

So when some in the crowd told Jesus that the Roman forces, directed by Pilate, had slaughtered a group of religious pilgrims while they were making their sacrifices, and remarked that *surely* this meant they were sinners, Jesus responded by saying, "No, I tell you." And then when Jesus countered their headline with one of his own about the tower of Siloam falling on eighteen people, asking if this catastrophe meant they had sinned more than others, he answered his own question and again said, "No, I tell you."

Jesus made it clear that they could not assume bad things happened to bad people. That was the prevailing thought back then – if your life was not going well then you must have sinned. But Jesus corrected them. Bad things *don't* happen to people based on how they sin or on how much they sin. Sin is sin and bad things happen. But then Jesus said, "No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Was Jesus contradicting himself? No, I tell you.

Jesus wanted to make clear that repenting is an equal opportunity activity. The people following Jesus thought that repenting was for big time sinners; repenting was for *those* people. All too often in religious circles, there is judgment of others. We believe the right things, we are better than they are, we don't sin like *those* people do. But the truth is we are all sinners. And Jesus wants us to turn from blaming God, or the powers that be, or somebody else, for everything that

is wrong in our lives and in the world. Christ invites us to look at ourselves instead, and then to turn, to repent, and look to God for help and salvation.

Sin is not only wrong things we do, but also things we *don't* do. In our confession each week we admit to things done and left undone. Sin can be when we don't take responsibility for our actions, or humble ourselves enough to admit we were wrong, or apologize, or set aside our own needs to help others. Sin can also be in our thoughts when we have imaginary conversations with people we are angry with, and even in the negative thoughts we have about our own self worth. These kinds of sin won't make the headlines but they are no less catastrophic to our lives, causing harm to our well-being and to our relationships. We all sin, individually and corporately. So what are we to do?

Jesus says that unless we repent, we will perish. To repent is more than confessing our sin. Repentance means, in essence, to turn. It is to turn from one way of thinking to another, to turn from going one direction in life to going in a new and different direction. I would offer that this is not something we do once at baptism, once a week in church, or even once a day in our bedtime prayers. The life of the Christian is a life of continual repentance, a life of constant turning from the assumptions of the world to the love and forgiveness of God. It is turning from our own selfishness and judgmental thinking to the generosity and justice of God.

Jesus illustrates this by telling the crowd the parable of the fig tree. And everyone listening would have laughed at first because fig trees were hardy and abundant. Fig trees thrive on neglect and don't need to be babied or fertilized. Not only that, but the fig tree was first mentioned in Genesis chapter 3. Remember? When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit, they realized they were naked and covered themselves with fig leaves. So from the beginning figs were associated with a need for repentance. And if a fig tree was not producing fruit, it was acting contrary to its nature, contrary to what God intended. So of course it would make sense to cut it down. The Hebrew scripture is filled with stories about destroying fig trees and vineyards that fail to produce – it's a sign of judgment.

But in the parable of the fig tree, Jesus changes the ending of the story. We assume there will be judgment, but instead we see mercy as the gardener gives the tree another opportunity, digs around its roots, and adds fertilizer. The gardener works to bring about hope and new life, encouraging the tree to live up to its true nature.

This is how much God loves us. God, in mercy, calls us to repentance, so that we can try again to live up to our true nature – we are made in the image of God, we are made to bear the fruit of mercy and forgiveness. Knowing this great love we no longer assume that when bad things happen they are a result of sin. Sin is sin, and bad things happen. And God is with us through it all.

Moving through these last few weeks of Lent, we have time to turn toward God. We have time to invite God, the gardener of our souls, to disturb and dig around the hard, dry soil we so firmly pack around our hearts, and to spread the fertilizer of love and grace that causes new growth. From the first to the twenty-first century, the news hasn't changed. The headlines still proclaim,

“No one who repents perishes, thanks to generous gardener!” “Amazing grace brings abundant fruit crop and new life!” Amen.