

Sunday, March 20, 2022 – “By God’s Grace, There’s Still Time”  
– Bible Study & Reflection on Luke 13:1-9

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Luke 13:1-9 (*Common English Bible*).

<sup>1</sup>Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He replied, “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. <sup>4</sup>What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.”

<sup>6</sup>Jesus told this parable: “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’ <sup>8</sup>The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. <sup>9</sup>Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’”

This Sunday’s Gospel begins with a question posed to Jesus about the fate of the unfortunate Galileans. What did they do that led Pontius Pilate to murder them? Perhaps they did nothing; tyrants oppress those who dare to rebel against them as we know all-too-well from the current Ukrainian War. How could the Galileans be to blame anymore than the Ukrainians today? State sponsored violence has been with us then and is yet with us now.

Frankly, it’s a bit of a surprise that it takes Luke’s Gospel this long to get around to discussing theodicy – justifying the ways of God to humanity. In our time, the question of why bad things happen to good people is a major reason why some people refuse to believe in an all-powerful God. How can it be that good folks (like us) should suffer misfortune, even injustice? When there’s a report of tragedy, it’s only natural for us to ask, “Why?” That we ask “Why?” shows that we think that we live in an orderly, reasonable universe. Therefore, every “Why?” question has some reasonable explanation. And we have a great need for explanations.

Scripture itself speaks of rewards for the righteous and punishment for the unrighteous. The character of Job suffered many losses of his family, his property, and his physical well-being. Job’s pain became the occasion for a series of interactions (Job, Chapters 3-28) with his friends, each of whom tried to figure out what Job had done to deserve this string of terrible luck.

In John 2:9, when they met a blind man, Jesus’ disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Surely there has got to be some reason, some rational response that can be mounted against seemingly random misfortune.

Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question in this week’s Gospel seems almost to brush aside their questions, as if Jesus refuses to engage in the theodicy question. Jesus says that the Galileans who died were no worse sinners than anyone else. Then Jesus adds another incident of misfortune: the fall of the tower in Jerusalem that killed eighteen persons. One misfortune is human made, the other is due to a natural disaster. Jesus states that these unfortunates upon whom the tower fell were no worse than anyone else – just your average group of sinners who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jesus seems more interested in talking about the responsibility of his disciples for the course of

their lives and their need to repent than he is in speculation about the causes of the tragedy that befell the victims of Pilate or the falling tower. Twice, in this week's Gospel, Jesus reiterates, "No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did" (Luke 13:3, 5).

But the main thing is that Jesus doesn't allow his disciples to draw him into a discussion of theodicy (justification of the ways of God to humanity) or to a well thought-out theology of human suffering. Instead, Jesus moves from two contemporary stories about human tragedy to expand the conversation into consideration of another greater tragedy that could occur, unless things change. Jesus moves from conversation about two tragedies to talk of Divine judgment.

It is significant that this interaction about tragedy is followed by the parable of the barren fig tree, which is a parable of judgment that ends with a merciful word. A landowner and the hired caretaker discuss what to do with an unproductive fig tree. The owner decides that the fig tree is worthless. Fig trees bear fruit at least once a year, more often in that part of the world. After three years with no figs, the tree is taking up space that could be better used by more productive trees. Cut it down.

The caretaker pleads for forbearance. Give the seemingly worthless tree yet another year. In order to cultivate the tree, the caretaker says that he will loosen the soil around it and add manure (natural fertilizer). If the dung doesn't do the trick and make a more productive tree, then cut it down. The unproductive tree is being given the gift of time, time to change, time to become more fruitful.

There is judgment and accountability, but there is also, because God is merciful, **the gift of time**. Our actions do have consequences. We might like to sit around and have extended discussions about the justice of God, the goodness of creation, why God allows evil tyrants to kill innocent people, why good people are stricken with horrible disease, in short, the fairness of God. But Jesus won't let us do that. Jesus turns our questions back upon us. He tells us a story that urges us to take matters in hand now, holding out the promise that God graciously gives us more time to be fruitful.

Our human condition finds us mired in the sin of fruitlessness, the sin of wasting time, the failure to bear good fruit so that the world may see what Jesus can do through ordinary people who are called to be Christ's disciples. Wasting time is a terrible tragedy. Yet, because God is merciful, there is still time to change our hearts, our thoughts, our words, and our actions. This present time with all of its difficulties, challenges, and problems is a gift from God.

All of this says to me that in spite of our good intentions, we are rarely the fruitful disciples whom we intend to be. The good that we would do in service to God, we do not. Our lack of fruitfulness, our failure to bear good fruit for the Realm of God judges our good intentions. And yet, God is not only the One who judges us and calls upon us to render an accounting. God is also good, gracious, and full of mercy. We have been given time to live up to our intentions and to bear good fruit in Christ's name. With God, we are always given another chance. Thanks be to God!

Grace & Peace,

Pastor Greg Rupright