

Have you ever noticed that parents say things they think make perfect sense but often don't sound all that clear on the other end? Perhaps you've heard (or maybe uttered) a few of these gems in your day.

- A father, upon hearing loud conversation coming from upstairs that's interrupting the news, looks up at the ceiling and shouts at the top of his voice, "THERE'S NO YELLING IN THIS HOUSE"
- A Mother, who after noticing some attitude in her daughter's remarks says harshly, *"I don't like your tone young lady"* - so your tone is going to help her understand that?
- Another well meaning mom told her child with a straight face, *"You need to shut your mouth and eat your supper"* - *umm makes eating a little difficult*
- And one of my all time favorites is the dad who, upon seeing his son climbing the tree he's warned him not to climb yells out across the yard, *"If you fall out of that tree and break your leg, don't you come running to me."*

On one hand the message seems clear. Yet on the other hand something doesn't seem to add up. This is the sense people often get from the gospel text for today- except it's not nearly as funny. The issues involved are deadly serious and you would think Jesus would make every effort to be perfectly clear.

On one hand he is. Jesus explicitly overturns the law of "karma" everyone assumes God must operate under. Jesus says, with no uncertain terms, that tragedies don't happen to people because they are somehow worse sinners than anybody else. Period. Full Stop.

### **What refreshing good news! What guilt and shame that should lift from us!**

For it seems that when tragedy or sickness or some other kind of difficult situation comes our way, a little voice rises up from some unknown place and says "it must be my fault". I must have done something bad (or BE something bad) to deserve this. Jesus says NO! God does not work that way. And as God's son, his voice carries the power to drown out that other little one that keeps trying to tell us otherwise.

And if Jesus would have stopped there, this would have been an easy text to read and an easy sermon to preach but he goes on and appears to take it all back by saying, "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did"

What do you mean Jesus? I thought you just said that "bad stuff" wasn't related to sinning and now you're telling us that unless we repent we are going to perish like those people you said didn't perish because of their sins? Where is this going?

Perhaps we should back up a bit and see first where Jesus has been. Unfortunately, we can't read the whole book of Luke during worship every week so we only get little chunks lectionary writers call "pericopes" to read aloud. But in the very first line of today's pericope there is a flashing sign ["at that very time"] telling us to connect these words to the ones that came before. Jesus has been on the way to Jerusalem teaching his disciples about hard choices that face them as his followers because his kingdom has much different priorities than the rest of the world.

Then he turns to the crowds and confronts them about their lack of conviction and unwillingness to change directions in their own lives. He uses an illustration about making amends with an accuser before the case goes to trial in order to avoid the punishment a judge can inflict.

And I think the people totally miss the point. Like most of us, instead of looking into their own lives and examining their own actions, they are quick to talk about somebody else. "Jesus did you hear about those Galileans, you know the ones who not only were killed but whose families had to suffer further shame when **their** blood was mixed with their sacrifices?" I can almost hear the murmuring going from ear to ear, accusing "those people" of somehow deserving their fate.

NO. Jesus says. 'You are missing the point. Those people weren't any worse sinners than all of you.' **Which means all of you** (all of us) **are sinners** and fall way short of what God intends. Those people (which might be us) are heading down the wrong road. We are not producing the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and generosity in the way God wants. Let these tragedies serve as examples. Lives were ruined. Shame and pain shattered relationships. In some real sense, this is what awaits those who do not repent, who do not turn around from selfish living, and embrace kingdom living.

If tragedy and suffering have any purpose whatsoever in this world, let them serve as a reminder that this life is temporary and one day, perhaps unexpectedly, we will all come face to face with our Maker. But even before that happens, God wants us to experience real LIFE. God desires repentance from us **so that** we might know the JOY of living and loving while we still have time in this world to be a blessing in the lives of others.

And as if to drive the point home that God is not some crusty ol' judge waiting to pound down his gavel, Jesus tells another parable. It's a good earthy one almost anyone who has ever grown anything can identify with. But the question is which character do you think represents "God"?

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Many times people will say the landowner is God and Jesus is the gardener, pleading for more time to cultivate some fruit. But what if God is the gardener? That would make a lot of sense to people who confess Jesus is God's son! God is the one who is always giving second chances. God is the one who is patient and willing to invest everything into his beloved garden in hopes that it produces good fruit because God loves us, God loves us, God loves us.

And that undeserved love-that grace- has an edge to it. It wants the best for us and God knows selfish living is not the best for **anyone** and it seems God will use just about **anything** to push us outside of the comfort bubble we live in. That's what brushes with mortality do. They remind us life is too short and precious to waste with insignificant things.

That's what a trip to Haiti does. It compels us to unload the "extras" we have accumulated and pick up "essential" truths poor people know better than we do. That just might also be why God brings certain people into our lives. -As a way to cultivate our own spiritual growth and dig up our hard hearts of complacency.

Will we treat such people as strangers from a foreign land, always somebody else's concern? Or will the grace of Almighty God grow empathy and compassion within us, so that we welcome them as family, as sisters and brothers in Christ, who enrich our lives and teach us something about living in the kingdom of God?

Time will tell... but the reminder for today is that time is short - at least in this world. We are well-practiced at examining the lives of others but Jesus would have us take a good long look at our own first and question what it is that we need to repent of so that we can bear good fruit into the world - so that we can be an example -not of tragedy- but of amazing grace that was not given to us in vain.

We can do this because God is our strength. When we fall down, God picks us up and when we are dry, God fills our cup. So with that promise let us be unafraid to blossom and bear some fruit. Amen.