

“Figs and Second Chances”

Text: Luke 13: 1-9

Tragedies abound in this day and age. Media has them covered and the list is lengthy: A plane of 157 people – all dead in the Ethiopian Airlines crash. About 50 people were killed and 50 injured while praying in their mosques in New Zealand. Thousands of people were evacuated after the devastating damage caused by Cyclone Idai in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. A Roman Catholic priest was stabbed while saying mass at St. Joseph’s Oratory in Montreal. What about the personal tragedies we all experience that keep us awake and haunt us at night? And we ask these questions, “Why are these things happening to me?” “Why do bad things happen to good people?” “Where are you God?” The Lukan passage read for us today has Jesus get pulled into a worried conversation about the latest news in Galilee. Verses 1-5 recounts Jesus responding to two tragic stories and verses 6-9 speaks of a parable of the fig tree. The first part sounds like something from the morning news. Pilate had ordered Roman soldiers to murder some Galileans in the temple alongside their animal sacrifices. This act was not only offensive and revolting, but it was also sacrilegious and ungodly, especially as it occurred within the walls of a sacred domain – the temple. It seemed that Jesus had this ability to read minds and know what people were thinking. “Do you think those Galileans who were killed under the hands of Pilate were worse sinners than all other Galileans? What about those 18 innocent construction labourers who were crushed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were worse sinners than those whose lives were spared from the crash?” Jesus’ answer to both questions is a resounding “no”. Just because people suffer a nasty, horrible death does not mean they were worse sinners than anybody else. And Jesus went on to say: “unless you repent, you too will perish.” He reminded his hearers that they should not think for one moment that the murdered Galilean and the victims in Siloam were responsible for their fate... any more today that Muslims at worship in Christchurch were responsible for a deranged white supremacist man bursting in with a killing machine. Or any more than plane crash fatalities or flood or Tsunami victims have somehow offended God.

What is Luke trying to emphasize in these first five verses? I grappled with two theological issues. One is the understanding of sin and sinfulness, and two, the connection between suffering and punishment. The common understanding of sin at the time of Jesus was that of a

cause and effect. Sin caused suffering and suffering must be the result of God's punishment. In the first century, most people believed that when tragedy strikes, it was a punishment, a warning, God's judgement. They believed that good things happen to good people. And when bad things happen, it was the result of the person's sinfulness or alienation from God. Take for example those Galileans that Pilate slaughtered. Instead of saying they were murdered because they challenged the political power and posed a threat to the existing regime, people say they were killed because they must have done something terrible. What about those who died crushed by the tower? Instead of looking at construction missteps, people say they must have angered God. This was the conventional wisdom in Jesus' time, and I know some of us today have the same line of thinking. Those murdered school children? Well, it happened because we've banned prayers in schools. Those two towers that collapse in New York City on Sept. 11? Oh - it was God's punishment on a corrupt and immoral society. Those people who died in the OC Transpo Bus collision? That must be God's will for them to die. If someone is ill, if someone dies, or if someone suffers, we easily point fingers at God – to explain the situation as “God's will” or “God's turning away from us” or even “the absence of God” and therefore we often conclude that sufferings are God's punishment. I don't buy this view – do you? Jesus says, “no.” That's not how this works. Jesus told us that the sun shines and the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.

You may or may not agree with me, but here is my personal understanding of sinfulness and suffering. I believe that every human being is gifted with freedom. This freedom as a gift must be used responsibly and diligently. When we are confronted with choices in life, our freedom to choose the good over evil is a wise and responsible choice. Sin is both personal and systemic. All the horrible news out there occurs because we have failed to use our human freedom responsibly. Evil lurks in the form of greed, abuse of power, violence, hatred, racism - you name it. But there is also another side to this understanding – the fact that we are human beings. We are not perfect – and so is the world we live in. There are natural disasters and tragedies beyond human control. Suffering is *not* a form of punishment but it doesn't mean that suffering is disconnected entirely from sin. Pilate's murderous acts of terror – as well as those horrific actions of today's tyrants that we read about in the news – are sinful. In the same manner, the tower of Siloam fell because it was built by a fraudulent contractor who wants more money in

his pocket. Sin has consequences, and there are all kinds of bad behaviors that contribute to much of the misery in the world, and the more we can stand up and confront those sins, whether personal or systemic, the less suffering there will be.

Death and suffering is a sad fact of life but it is a reality we all must contend with. What matters is how we live our lives, how we treat our neighbours, how we look after the earth. Despite the fact that life sometimes may appear to be tragic and harsh, Jesus is pointing us to the right direction: "unless you repent, you will likewise perish." Jesus' words are direct. His call is clear. He calls the people of his day and ours to repent from embracing doctrines or ideologies that teach of a God who punishes and sends violence, tragedy, illness and death to people and the whole of creation; to repent from pointing fingers at God whose anger burns into flames at human mistakes and wrongdoings; to repent of believing that God allows us to repay an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, evil with evil; to repent of one's acts that harm others. Repent. Turn around. Change for the better.

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin was senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City, when his son Alex was killed in a tragic car accident. Alex was driving in a terrible storm; he lost control of his car and careened into the waters of Boston Harbor. Rev. Coffin preached about his son's death. He thanked all the people for their messages and acts of condolences. But he also got upset and angry to those who had hinted that Alex's death was God's will. "I knew the anger would do me good," he said. "Do you think it was God's will that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper...that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm? Do you think it was God's will that there are no street lights along that stretch of the road and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor? The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break"

So, as the people are asking Jesus whether tragedy is God's judgement, Jesus in response tells them a story about who God really is. He tells a story about a vineyard owner, a fig tree and a gardener which we read from verses 6-9. The fig tree was not doing what it's supposed to do. It's not producing figs. The owner's response for the tree's lack of productivity is to cut it down. But the gardener, full of hope and compassion, stood up for the tree. The gardener

begged the owner to give the tree another year to live. “Maybe there is a mystery at work here you and I don’t understand. Let me feed and fertilize the tree and if there is still no fruit next year. Go ahead and chop it down.” One more year. One more chance. A year of reprieve, a year of grace. It is limited time but it is a time to turn around to heal and to grow. With good loving care, the gardener knows that it’s worth the wait.

How do we interpret this parable? The problem is, we still view this story like a traditionalist. God is the vineyard owner; the Gardener is Jesus; the Fig tree is Israel. We still image God through the lens of the vineyard owner, through the lens of a God who punishes us for not doing what we are supposed to do, who sends tragedy and calamity our way when we mess up. We think that God is the vineyard owner, angry at our lack of production, our lack of fruit. And we see Jesus as the gardener, as an intermediary – someone standing between us and God’s anger, asking God on our behalf to, give us one more chance, one more year to clean our mess, to get our acts together whether we will truly repent. But the problem with this interpretation is that we still view God, the vineyard owner, who punishes people for not doing what they are supposed to do, who cuts them off when they mess up.

What if the vineyard owner is not God but those who value productivity the most? Those who take rigid rules seriously? Those who measure human value by good works and achievements? Or worse - those called by Jesus as hypocrites? The vineyard owner is one who measures our value in how good we are, if we are following all the rules, if we are doing what we are supposed to - that we are takers and good for nothing. It is this kind of a vineyard owner that sees an unproductive tree and demands that it be uprooted and be thrown into the fire.

And who is the gardener? For me, Jesus is the gardener – Jesus who taught us to follow the ways of God and what God stands for – love, justice, kindness, compassion – Jesus who says no to the opportunistic vineyard owner. Jesus who stood up and spoke truth to power. The gardener could be anyone whose unconditional love proclaims the value of the fig tree not in terms of the fruits or works or accomplishments - but hopes in good faith that this tree, once given a second chance might turn around and bear fruit.

I believe the fig tree is all of us. Sometimes we are unproductive, malnourished or unable or unwilling to nourish others. Other times we are achievers, we bear fruit. Sometimes we feel

helpless or hopeless, ignored or dismissed. Sometimes we feel on top of the world and ready to take another step. Sometimes we mess up. Other times we are OK. The gardener steps forward and challenges the opportunistic vineyard owner to quit his judgmental character and offer the fig tree a second chance, another season, another year, some more space to begin again. And so Jesus is saying through this parable that in the midst of tragedy, don't blame the victims of violence, the victims of hunger, the victims of poverty, the victims of grief, the victims of suffering. Don't try to explain away tragedy by blaming it on God. Don't look for tragedy and trauma as evidence of the vineyard owner who has come and gotten even, offered retribution for wrongdoing.

Dear friends, the parable of the fig tree contains some basic truths. Many of us do not bear the fruit in our lives we would like to bear. Take heart. There is still time to turn our lives around. Repent. Change. Turn around. Why not make this your commitment in this season of Lent? It's never too late. Amen.

Sources:

1. BCUC Lectionary Group
2. Inspired by the sermons and reflections of Barbara K. Lundblad, William Sloane Coffin, David R. Henson, and Alyce Mackenzie and Debie Thomas.