

Of Figs and Grapes

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November 11, 1994

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Luke 13: 1-9

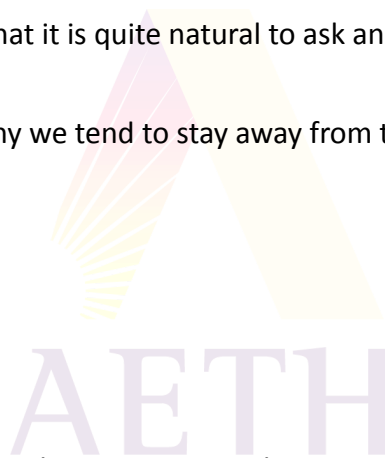
I have often told my students that it is important for us to preach every now and then on a text we do not like. It keeps us honest. It keeps us struggling with Scripture. I have also urged my students to try to preach on the text assigned by the lectionary. When preparing for this morning, however, I decided that I could not in all honesty preach on the assigned text. If you would like to have a hint as to why not, let me simply tell you that that text begins in Mk. 12: 38: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes!”

In any case, I have decided to keep at least half of my own advice, I therefore have chosen for today a text I do not particularly like:

There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” And he told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on it and found none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well

and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” [Luke 13:1-9]

This is a text most of us avoid, because it raises a number of thorny questions, particularly the age-old question of why human tragedies do occur. When tragedy strikes, the first question we ask is, Why? Why did my child have to die? What evil had he done? Was it perhaps for some evil I did? Why does famine strike in Africa? Is it perhaps because of some particular sinfulness of the Africans or their leaders? Why did those people die in the accident in Indiana, and not others? These are all questions that it is quite natural to ask and quite impossible to answer. And that is one of the reasons why we tend to stay away from this passage in the Gospel of Luke.

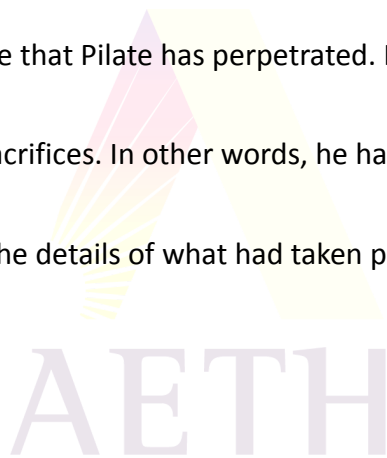


Another reason is that the passage does not answer those questions. As a pastor, I have often found myself having to deal with this sort of question, and wishing I had a ready-made answer, one that would immediately console the bereaved, enlighten the perplexed, and reassure the doubting.

But Jesus does not give us, as we would like, a ready-made answer that we could give to the

mother whose teen-age son has just died in an automobile accident, like a doctor prescribes a pill to a patient. Rather, all that he does is to tell us that a certain answer is wrong, and then he moves on to tell us that such tragedies, unexplainable and mysterious though they may be, do call survivors to greater obedience.

Let us look more closely at the text. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, when someone comes and tells him of a gruesome crime that Pilate has perpetrated. He has mingled the blood of a number of Galileans with their sacrifices. In other words, he has killed them just as they were offering their sacrifices to God. The details of what had taken place are not altogether clear. But several things are clear.



The first is that this terrible crime took place in the Temple in Jerusalem, for this was the place where the Galileans would have come to offer sacrifices to God.

The second is that, precisely because it had taken place in the Temple, it was a most horrible crime. It was not only murder, but also sacrilege. One may well surmise that many Jews were

reminded of the event, several decades earlier, when Pompey rode his horse into the holy of holies. Or that other time, many years earlier, when the Temple was destroyed and the people led into captivity. We certainly are reminded of the murder of Becket before the high altar in the cathedral of Canterbury, or more recently, of the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero under similar circumstances in a church in El Salvador.

Thirdly, what becomes clear when we read the entirety of the Gospel, is that there was a great deal of animosity on the part of some of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem towards all Galileans. Indeed, many Jews viewed the Galileans as second-class Jews, as standing somewhere between the true Jews and the heathenish Gentiles.

For all these reasons, those who are telling Jesus of Pilate's crime are raising several questions in one. They are raising first of all the question of the reason for such seemingly meaningless suffering. Secondly, they are raising the question of whether good Jews should not be incensed at Pilate and all the Romans. In other words, as in so many other places in the Gospel narrative, they are trying to place Jesus in the difficult position of having to appear either unpatriotic or

subversive. If he condemns Pilate's act, he will be accused of inciting rebellion against the Romans. If he plays down its importance, his listeners will be outraged at his religious and human insensitivity. Finally, they are raising the question of the relations between Galileans and other Jews. In telling him of the horrible thing that has happened to these Galileans they are raising the commonly held belief among Jews that Galileans were less faithful than other Jews: Could that be why they have suffered such a tragedy? Perhaps this is the reason why Jesus responds: Do you think that these particular Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans? And then he sharpens the question by bringing it closer to home and referring to an incident in Jerusalem: Those 18 upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?

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To me this entire text is particularly poignant because I have lost count of the number of times when, speaking to someone about hunger in various parts of the world, I have heard the response that these people are suffering from famine because of their sin. Or, when speaking of the suffering in our inner cities and our minority enclaves, I have also been told that such misery is the result of those people's sin. I do agree that famine and misery are the result of

human sin, although very likely not the sin of those who are suffering and dying. Therefore, upon reading this text, I wonder if Jesus wouldn't have responded with something like: Do you believe that those Somali children who have starved to death were worse sinners than the rest of Somalia, worse sinners than the ruthless and uncaring warlords under which they lived? Or the 68 who perished in the crash in Indiana, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others?

When we put the matter in such terms, it is clear that whatever we say about the suffering of those far away must be consistent with what we are ready to say about the tragedies that strike closer to home, and even about our own suffering. If we combine this with what the rest of Scripture says, it is clear that at least some suffering is caused by those who appear to be most blessed, or at least strongest.

Hear for instance what the prophet Ezekiel has to say on the matter: "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what

you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?” Those words are from Ezekiel 34. I invite you to read the entire chapter, where you will find that often human suffering is the result of human sin, yes, but not necessarily of those who suffer. You will also find, let me say in passing, that contrary wise to what we learned in Economics 101, it usually is not scarcity that causes greed, but rather greed that causes scarcity.

But back to our Gospel text. There Jesus carries the matter one step further, and shows that we are posing the question in the wrong way. The surprising thing is not that so many die. The even more surprising thing is that we still live. If it were a matter of sin, we would all be dead. Twice he says: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” And then he illustrates his meaning with a parable.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

And he said to the vinedresser: “Lo, these many years I have come seeking fruit in this fig tree, and I find none.” Then a conversation ensues with the outcome that the owner of the vineyard agrees that for one more year the tree will be left to stand. It will even receive special care. But

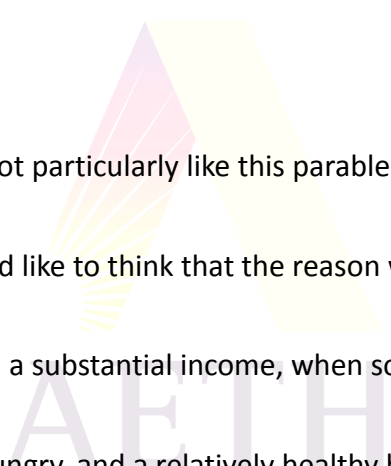
if at the end of that time it has not produced fruit, it shall be cut down.

What does the parable mean, in this context? It clearly means that those of us who survive, those Galileans who were not killed by Herod, or those Jews on whom the tower did not fall, or those of us who have not died from famine, or those whose airplane has not crashed, are living only by the grace of God, and that our continued life is for the purpose that we bear fruit.

It also means that even our apparent blessing and abundance is not necessarily something of which we should boast. The tree that has produced no fruit receives special attention and added fertilizer, not because it is so good, but rather because it is so poor.

In order to understand the poignancy of the parable, one has to remember what a vineyard looks like at the very last time in the season when one would normally come looking for figs on a fig tree. The vineyard would have yielded its grapes, and would already have been pruned. It would all have been cut down, and one would see nothing but dry and gnarled stumps. And, in the midst of this scene of apparent desolation, stands a verdant fig tree. It has never been

pruned. It has been allowed to grow tall and green. Now, it will receive even further special treatment. The vinedresser will dig around it, and give it an exceptional dose of fertilizer. To a casual observer, the tree would appear to be specially blessed, and the vines cursed and forgotten, and one would think that the fig tree must be especially valuable if it is treated with such care. But the truth is exactly the opposite. The fig tree is receiving special care because it has yet to give the fruit it was meant to bear.



I said at the beginning that I do not particularly like this parable. And this is the final and true reason why I do not like it. I would like to think that the reason why I have a comfortable house, when so many are homeless, and a substantial income, when so many are poor, and all kinds of food to eat, when so many are hungry, and a relatively healthy body, when so many are ill, is that I have somehow been particularly faithful. I would like to think that the reason why I have already lived longer than the average person on this globe is because my life has been so productive.

This text, however, leads me to think otherwise. Could it be, could it just be, that the reason

why I have been given all these advantages is that otherwise I would have great difficulty bearing fruit? Could it be that all these things of which I so pride myself are really just so much manure, piled on me because otherwise I'd be such a lousy fruit tree? It is a question I must ponder, a question that I invite you to ponder in the days ahead.

And what is a question for us as individuals and as families is also a question for churches and institutions. We tend to admire the big church with the tall steeples, the large staff and the professional choir. We tend to think that the fact that a church has many resources at its command is a sign that it has been faithful. But this parable raises the question that it may really be otherwise. I have seen very poor churches, both in this country and overseas, churches with no social prestige, churches with no buildings, where one can breathe the Spirit of God, and where one can taste the fruits of mercy and justice. And I sometimes wonder could it be that our own wealth of resources of which we like to pride ourselves, has been given to us, not because we have been so good that we have earned it, but in an effort to lead us to bear fruit, to share those resources, to share of ourselves, and that the reason we survive is, not our great budget, our nice music, our fine sermons, our beautiful buildings, our sophisticated theology,

but this miraculous grace of the owner of the vineyard who has decided to give us one more chance?

