

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE; LUKE 13:1-9; LENT III, 2-28-16; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

No wonder they put Jesus to death – not just Pilate and the Sanhedrin, but their accomplices too – the crowd, you and me. It took everyone working together to condemn and execute this man.

You see, the people in today's story just wanted a simple answer. They wanted a spiritual insurance policy. They wanted protection from the vicissitudes of life – the crises and disasters that happen unpredictably or by falling victim to someone's dark design. So they asked, much like the crowd asked Jesus about the man born blind 'who sinned this man or his parents?' -- they asked if the Galileans killed by Pilate, or the Jerusalemites killed by the falling Tower of Siloam, were worse sinners than all the other Galileans or Jerusalemites in Palestine. Did God put them to death because they were the worst?

We, in the 21st century, think suspicions about "something we did" causing something bad to happen to us as punishment, is an outdated idea. We like to think our theology has evolved beyond such superstitions. But as a pastor who has observed, and as a person who has experienced pain and suffering, I can tell you that when tragedy strikes in the form of an illness, or personal calamity, or a natural disaster such conclusions come to mind all too quickly.

Much to their consternation and perhaps to ours, Jesus does not really answer the question. He's like John Kasich the other night in the final Republican debate who refused to get lured by Wolf Blitzer into condemning his opponents. Rather, he kept the focus on policy and gave reasonable answers to what were, hard it was to separate from Wolf's invoking the bile of Trump or Cruz, underlying policy questions.

Jesus does not let his questioners distract him into a dissertation on sin. He turns their questions into a call for repentance. When his questioners think they will get him to engage in a juicy conversation about the gradations of sin and absolve them – since while they were sinners they were, like you and me, basically good people, not felons or criminals – Jesus says the Galileans and Jerusalemites who were killed were not worse than the others. The real issue, he tells them, is ***unless you repent you will perish as they did.***

Jesus tells them the clock is ticking. He links their repentance to the kind of life they are living. The parable of the fig tree connects a repentant heart to a grace-filled life of character. If we repent of our self-absorption, satisfying our driven egos instead of thinking about and reaching out to those who, like poor Lazarus, lie at our door, then it ought to be visible in how we spend our resources and treat others. If it isn't visible then our fate will like that of the barren fig tree.

Jesus is not saying we earn abundant, fulfilled life by good works.

He's saying good works are the fruit of a life that trusts in and experiences God's unlimited love and mercy when we come clean and repent of our sin.

St. Paul, Luther and Calvin often make this point.

Perhaps you remember Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Six people walk across one of those rickety, primitive bridges that collapses, they fall to their deaths, a priest in the village sets out to prove that they were nefarious people whom God chose to kill, he researches their lives sure that he will find plenty of sin and comes to the conclusion that they were no worse or better than anyone else in the village. The sun and rain fall upon good and the bad alike – by God's design.

Rabbi Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, sets out to solve the same problem when his son is diagnosed with a rare disease that will not allow him to live a normal life. Kushner calls such diagnoses or events 'bad luck.' There is good luck and bad luck both of which are unrelated to a person's goodness or badness. Life's blessings and curses can be random.

Rabbi Kushner was comforting himself and the millions of people who read his book. The incredible success of his book indicates how real the question put to Jesus is for us. But Jesus goes in a different direction. He knows how our questions can deter us from another question; a question not about how bad things happen to good people, but about the state of our souls right now; how we stand before God; the condition of our conscience given the lives we are leading today.

I'm not so sure those asking Jesus the question were pleased with his answer. He turns the tables on them. Maybe we aren't pleased either. We live in a narcissistic age when suffering seems unfair as the injury litigation industry testifies to; our society blames others for suffering then sues for damages; our age is more likely to trust doctors, lawyers and therapists for remedies to what are essentially spiritual problems; Karl Menninger asked a generation ago: What ever became of sin? He says in his book by that title that we are more likely today to explain sin away with psychological diagnoses and pharmaceutical remedies rather than repentance.

When Jesus is asked about life's fairness, he asks the questioners about their relationship with God.

The same thing is going on in this election season. The candidates play to the fears of economic inequality and terrorism by blaming various villains. There are grave issues that need to be fixed but it's too easy to lay the blame at the feet of the current President or the ineptitude of Congress or people with net-worth in the seven figures. We the people have responsibility for the people we elect and the laws they pass.

The season of Lent is about taking spiritual responsibility for our lives. It is about soul-searching, allowing our conscience to speak the truth to your hearts and minds.

While Jesus' confronting his questioners may seem abrupt and harsh in fact he was demonstrating concern for their spiritual well-being.

The suddenness of the slaying of the Galilean worshippers and the collapse of the Tower of Siloam both come without warning. That's often how tragedy strikes. Jesus is urging his listeners to repent without delay for death may come at any time to them like a thief in the night as he says elsewhere in the gospel. Repentance only really works as an attitude toward life, not as an occasional act.

Hence, the parable of the fig tree. The gardener intervenes, negotiates another year to see if the tree, with careful landscaping and care, will produce fruit.

Repentance alone is meaningless. But if it is followed by a changed life, by some attempt to embrace a life of character where one of drivenness and self-absorption existed then, like the fig tree, it will be worth something.

We don't earn our worth by good works; we manifest good works because we are worthy, because we trust and experience the Creator of Life as the source of our life and well-being.

The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when they hung Jesus on the cross. Now, this same Jesus takes our question – why do bad things happen to good little me? and makes it cruciform:

Here's the tough question of Lent: can you and I trust God – in joy or in pain – to be our God? Can we love God without linking our love to the cards life deals us?

It removes the quid pro quos we invent in our relationship with God. It levels the playing field with ourselves and our neighbor. It acknowledges that this world is imperfect and we are free agents – and yes, bad things do happen to good people.

This congregation has experienced its share of pain and suffering over the past year – from four young men to drugs and alcohol to several of our members whose final days were spent with hospice.

My niece and her husband lost a four month old infant to sudden infant death syndrome last October. I remember saying to our family at his graveside service that there are no answers, no explanations for a tragedy like this.

Some of us, right now, are facing diagnoses of health or changes of career that have re-ordered our lives, changed our daily agendas, introduced burdens we never expected or hoped we would never have to carry.

God's love brings no promises about good or bad save the promise that God will not allow anything worse to happen to us than happened to his own Son.

So we come to the Lord's Table, and are given not answers, but bread and wine which are, for us, nothing less than his broken body and spilled blood.

This is the way God responds to our questions – not with answers that flatter us, or make the world simpler than it really is, but with his life given for us, that we might more fully give our lives to him. That's the spiritual gold we search for; the longed for destination of our quest for a faith that is real and relevant. ⁱAmen.

ⁱ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, January through March 2016, 37ff.