

The Fig Tree and the Gardener

March 7, 2010

Luke 13.1-9

Digging Dirt

I left the house one morning this week, as I usually do when I'm coming to work, I went out the walk toward the garage and that's when....I saw them. Where only piles of snow had been for weeks and weeks...there they were. Among the limp ivy leaves, poking through the dormant grass and among the dead leaves left from last fall, there they were. The first harbingers of spring in our yard...the little white blossoms of old-fashioned snowdrops. They are the promise of spring and a reminder of growth and new life. And with them, there's the alluring thought of gardening and a call to dig in the dirt.

This morning we find ourselves in a story about a gardener and a tree, a fruitless fig tree. This parable is preceded by a conversation between Jesus and his comrades on the way, a conversation about two tragedies.

Two tragedies

Although these events were not only familiar to ancient audiences but foremost in their minds, we don't know a whole lot about them because neither is mentioned elsewhere in scripture. The first incident involved the mingling of blood - that of people and of animals. Although it's difficult to tell exactly what had happened here, during his reign, Pontius Pilate had gained a reputation of violence and ruthlessness. All that we know for sure is that some Galileans were killed as they made their pilgrimage to the temple. It is possible that this was part of the fiasco when Pilate decided to siphon money from the temple treasury for an aqueduct project that he wanted to complete under his rule. This aqueduct was to carry water from a spring, some 30 miles away from Jerusalem, directly into the city. Understandably, the Jews were not happy about funding Pilate's pet project with their temple donations. It has been suggested that, since the Galileans were known as "a highly inflammable people,"¹ they were most likely up in arms. As the crowds gathered, Pilate, wanting to remind them that Rome was in charge, instructed his soldiers to mingle with them, with the intent to break up the dissatisfied crowd. It's thought that the soldiers got carried away and used far more violence than intended. And a considerable number of Galileans lost their lives, mixing their blood with that of the sacrifices they had brought to the temple.²

The second tragic incident, involving a tower, we know even less about. It is possible that this tower was perched on the city wall of Jerusalem, perhaps even a part of the aqueduct project. In its sudden collapse, 18 innocent by-standers, or maybe workers on Pilate's aqueduct, were killed.

¹ *The Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke* by William Barclay, p. 177.

² *The Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke* by William Barclay, p. 177.

Here we have two very different tragic events being told to Jesus by his countrymen and friends who were on the journey with him. Whereas the first conflict seemed to have been an act of brutality, the collapsed tower of Siloam was a random calamity. Yet after both stories, Jesus had the same response – he said to his hearers that if they did not repent, they too would perish.

Before we look more closely at Jesus' response, it might be helpful to think about what might have been going on in the minds of Jesus' followers in light of these tragedies. In both of these cases, apparently they were trying to make some sense of the loss. And it appears they were playing the blame game – either the Galileans were to blame (they were worse sinners), or God was to blame (this was God's will, perhaps punishment), or the Romans were to blame.

The Blame Game

First of all, the Jews of that day directly connected sin and suffering – it was part of their world view. They thought that misfortune, disease, and even sudden death, were a direct punishment for sin. We remember in the Old Testament the response of Job's friend Eliphaz to Job's intense suffering, when he asked him, "Whoever perished being innocent?"³ These Jews shared this view; they thought the victims of these tragedies must have been sinners. Common sense said that if there is an obvious effect, then there is an explainable cause. Sin meant inevitable death.

Even though our world view has changed, we still struggle to understand tragedy. We too, long to make sense of things, to come to terms with why bad things happen. We all witnessed the images of our Haitian and Chilean brothers and sisters, whose world was forever changed by the devastation of the earthquakes. And we can each tell our own stories of terrible tragedies that have happened to good and faithful people.

During the years when William Sloane Coffin was senior minister at Riverside Church in New York City, his son, Alex, was killed in a tragic car accident. Alex was driving in a terrible storm and lost control of his car, careening into the waters of Boston Harbor. The following Sunday, Dr. Coffin preached about his son's death. He thanked all of the people for their messages of condolence, for food brought to their home, for an arm around his shoulder when no words would do. But he also raged; he raged about well-meaning folks who had hinted that Alex's death was God's will. They were looking for someone to blame. "I knew the anger would do me no good," he said. Then he went on: "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."⁴

3 Job 4.7

4 Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad, *Could This Be the Year for Figs?*, March 18, 2001

It is hard not to play the blame game. It is easier for us to cope with false blame than to deal with a world that seems chaotic enough to have these terrifying things happen for no apparent reason, with innocent people perishing.

Another speculation

There's an alternate interpretation of these catastrophes that I had never considered before that is quite intriguing. Perhaps as Jesus was journeying with his fellow Galileans, his home folks, they were fired up “about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices”. And if they really were “a highly inflammable people,” then maybe they added fuel to the fire in portraying Pilate’s wickedness – kind of demonizing the enemy to appeal to their nationalistic sympathies. It’s very possible that some of those who were murdered were their friends or even family members. And Jesus' comrades were out to lay the blame. Perhaps it was expected that once Jesus heard the story, he too would react as his countrymen and demonize Pilate and the Romans. But Jesus didn't jump on the bandwagon - he didn't take part in the self-righteous anger of his fellow Galileans. On the other hand, he didn't say that the occupying Romans were the epitome of goodness, or that their oppression was anything but oppression. But he chose not to have himself or his comrades defined by their enemies.⁵

Human tendencies

Throughout history, humanity has continued to demonize the enemy. Horror stories were spread during World War I about atrocities that German soldiers were said to have committed, to the likes to the Slaughter of the Innocents. And before the US militarily ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1993, Congress heard story after story about atrocities committed by Iraqi soldiers, allegedly done out of pure malice. Eventually both of these situations turned out to be falsehoods, stories of atrocities which had been contrived to fuel martial fury and vengeance, and to feed nationalism. Anyone who questioned them at the time, who wanted be certain of the sources, was accused of national disloyalty.⁶

Even today, we can see this happening around and among us – when everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of the world. Christians blame Muslims and Muslims blame Christians. Fundamentalists blame Hollywood and the ACLU. Liberals blame the Fundamentalists and on and on.

Jesus' Response

Whatever understanding we find in these two tragedies, whatever light we find, wherever we see ourselves, Jesus' response is still the same...life is uncertain, death is capricious, none of us is exempt. And life's fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, away from victims and evil-doers, and away from the “why” questions. Instead, Jesus turns to those who have survived the hazards of the universe and of human society, and he speaks of repentance.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, p. 96. Article by Rodney Clapp.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Repent – a word that comes with baggage for some of us. We've heard the high-pressured evangelists: there's not much time left – repent now – do you know where you will be if you die today? We hear it as a threat, meant to induce fear. And yet, Jesus calls us to repent. And the story of the fig tree follows.

Parable

Stories of unfruitful trees were common in ancient Far Eastern wisdom literature. An ancient scribe wrote this story. See if it sounds familiar:

*And I spake to Nathan thus: Son, thou hast been to me like a palm-tree which has grown with roots on the bank of the river. When the fruit ripened, it fell into the river. The lord of the tree came to cut it down, and the tree said: Leave me in this place, that in the next year I may bear fruit. The lord of the tree said; Up to this day hast thou been to me useless, in the future thou wilt not become useful.*⁷ Those with Jesus on the way, his comrades, had heard this parable before. But Jesus' rendition of the parable took a twist...a new twist.

In the familiar story, the lord of the tree refuses to allow the tree another year in which to prove itself. But that isn't the end of Jesus' parable, is it? Jesus' hearers knew that this was a new version with a new ending.

The gardener doesn't cut down the tree. Instead, the gardener says, "Sir, leave it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it." There's urgency and hope in the gardener's voice. "Give me a year – I'm not willing to give up on this tree. Let me dig around it, loosen the hard soil, and fertilize it." We all know what can happen to a plant when the soil is rich and loamy.

Repent, Jesus says. "Metanoeo" in Greek – to come to one's senses, to change one's mind for the better. It spends less time looking at the past and saying "I'm sorry" than looking to the future and saying "Wow!" It's not a summons for a general feeling of remorse about lives poorly lived, but it's a message of grace, to discern the time in which we live, and to reorient our lives to the reality of the kingdom of God. According to Dr. Barbara Lundblad, it calls us to turn around, to believe that things can be different, to trust the One who calls us to turn around.⁸ It's a call to live each day as a gift from God.

This call, and this season of Lent, is a time to take stock of our lives. It is a time to change our minds, to turn in some new directions, and to enter our future with a sense of the hope, the love and the companionship that God offers to us in our lives. God has something in store for us in this next year. God will be there with us and for us. To repent is to recognize this, to turn toward the future with faith, with grace, with love.

⁷ *The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 271.

⁸ Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad, *Could This Be the Year for Figs?*, March 18, 2001

Great Expectations!

“Don’t cut it down. I’m going to do everything I can to help this tree live and thrive and bear fruit. Leave it alone for one more year,” we hear the gardener say.

The gardener is urgent – “Look at your life,” he says, “and dare to ask the hard questions:”

- Am I stingy in my love for others?
- Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs?
- Do I refuse to believe that I can be forgiven, carrying around paralyzing guilt, year after year?
- Am I so busy making a living that I’ve forgotten how to make a life?

Jesus digs at us with questions like these. “What have you done,” Jesus asks, “and what have you left undone?” Such questions, like the parable of the fruitless fig tree, move us toward repentance and to trust the one who calls us to turn around, who will be with us every step of the turn.

This is a call to stop the blame game and make the world a bit better, no matter how much time we have. “Die when I may,” said Abraham Lincoln, “I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower where I thought a flower would grow.”

In Luke 4, Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord's favor – a year of forgiveness, a year of restoration and a year of second chances. This is what the gardener was asking for.

I haven't checked the Farmer's Almanac, not even the “farmer’s version” of the Farmer’s Almanac, but I have a hunch....this is a good year for figs!!