

(Luke 13:1-9 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' <sup>8</sup> He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

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## Blame, Accountability and a Second Chance

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Text: Luke 13:1-9

What draws a person to religion? What gets them out of bed on Sunday morning and sitting in church? What gets them on their knees praying? What gets people thinking about God? What gets them to have faith, or maybe wanting to have faith? I suppose there are nearly as many answers to that question as there are people to ask it of. There can be many reasons a person may be drawn to religion.

But if the Bible is to be believed, a common preoccupation of those who came to Jesus was some wonderment about the reasons things happen the way they do. Why was this man born blind? Why do bad things happen? And on the other side of the ledger, can we have high seats in heaven if we are good?

Or maybe they weren't wondering why things happen as they do so much as they were suspicious that they knew the answer. In John when they encounter the man born blind, the disciples ask, "Who sinned, this man or his father?"

In today's passage a great brutality has just been reported to Jesus. We know from the historian Josephus that Pontius Pilate is known for his brutality and disdain for Jewish religious practices. So the news we hear is fully in character. We hear about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices..

We can deduce a great deal about this story. The sacrifice of lambs was allowed only in the Jerusalem Temple. Generally, pilgrims from the Galilean countryside would have come to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the holy feast of Passover. Laypeople would have made these sacrifices in the forecourt of the priests. In all likelihood we have this atrocity unfolding: Pilgrims from the Galilee come to Jerusalem at the holy feast of Passover. As they sacrifice their lambs in the holy Temple of Jerusalem, in the forecourt of the priests, Pilate's Roman soldiers swopped down and slaughtered the pilgrims. The verse gives us the vivid and repulsive image of the blood of the lambs and the blood of the pilgrims mixing together on the floor of the Temple forecourt.

Recently, also, there has been a great accident in the city. The tower at Siloam was probably a tower in the old wall of Jerusalem near the Pool of Siloam in the old Lower City. This tower collapsed and killed eighteen Jerusalem residents.

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And Jesus knows his disciples. Jesus knows that his disciples must believe that the Galileans in the temple and the Jerusalemites at the tower received what they deserved. Jesus knew that religion was fulfilling two critical functions for his disciples, each important to them, each at the heart of their faith.

First, religion helped explain the world. A world in which Pilate could cut you down even as you worshiped, or the city wall could fall on your head, was an uncertain place. It is perhaps not too hard to understand why Jesus' disciples looked for an explanation to satisfy their uncertainty. Far better to believe that there was some reason that these particular Galileans were butchered by Pilate, or why these particular citizens of Jerusalem had the wall tower crush them, than to believe that these were simply random events in an unpredictable world. Far safer it must have seemed to believe that there was some cause and effect at work, that the unfortunates somehow got what they deserved. So, first Jesus understood his disciples use religion to make sense out of the world, and especially to explain why bad things happened to some people and good things to others.

And the second thing that Jesus understood drew his disciples to religion was related to this first. For, if there was a reason why bad things happened, then there must be a way to avoid them, too. If sinners felt the sword at their neck and the boulder at their skull, then better not be a sinner, better do something like follow Jesus. For if one could avoid sin, perhaps one could avoid punishment, too.

Now, I don't suppose I need to say that these ways of thinking still have some small amount of currency even now. You may heard the rumor that sinners go to hell and good people go to heaven. I know none of you are here today for any such reason as that. But you may have heard the rumor. Or you may have heard that poor people are poor because they don't work hard enough, or that gay people get AIDS because it's God's punishment.

Ah yes, what a wonderful thing it is to have a world with such predictable cause and effect relationships. It eliminates so much confusion. It makes it so much easier to walk away from those who are in trouble if we know that they are at fault. It makes it so much safer for us if we are sure those that Pilate murdered or those on whom the wall fell were simply getting what they deserved. For then it won't happen to us who do not deserve such a fate.

Jesus is sure that this is how his disciples think, and in the strongest terms possible he tells them they are wrong: "No, I tell you." Were the Galileans Pilate slaughtered worse sinners than other Galileans? "No, I tell you." Were the eighteen on whom the tower fell greater offenders than all others in Jerusalem? "No, I tell you." Jesus could not be clearer. The belief that his disciples had, the belief that you could tell bad people by the bad things that happened to them, he dismissed emphatically.

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And think about it. Think about it. Jesus is about to face his own end at the hands of an angry mob and a fascist Roman governor. Before any Christian gets too confident condemning someone on the basis of the bad things that happen to them, that Christian would do well to pause and remember the fate of the man after whom the religion is named. I don't suppose Jesus went to the cross for his sins, nor are we given the right to assume that others do. "No, I tell you," says Jesus.

\*\*\* When I studied analytical philosophy, I was impressed with the neatness of logic. It was the same kind of neatness the disciples were after, I think. In logic it is fundamental that a statement cannot be both true and false. It cannot be true both that today is Sunday and today is not Sunday. It cannot be true both that we are in Cambridge and we are not in Cambridge. It cannot be true both that a person is guilty of a crime and not guilty of a crime. You get the idea. It seems pretty reasonable, self-evident, actually.

So Jesus must have really confused the disciples when he told them, "No, I tell you neither the people Pilate killed nor the people the tower fell on had these things happened to them because they deserved them," and then he turned right around, hardly drew a breath, and said, "but unless you repent, you will perish as they did."

What is going on here? Are the disciples held to a different standard from everyone else? First Jesus tells them not to assume that people get what they deserve, and then he turns around and tells them that if they don't get their own lives together, they will perish as they deserve. This sounds confusing.

Well, it is. It is confusing. Jesus is telling those who are listening to him some very baffling things, which also happen to be true. On the one hand, Jesus is telling those who will listen to him that you cannot conclude that people are bad because bad things happen them. On the other hand he is saying that there is a certain amount of cause and effect at work. He is saying that there are consequences to one's iniquities.

In this brief passage Jesus is making some of the most important distinctions of all his teaching. He is making it clear that the world is not simple cause and effect. He knows how appealing that simple idea of cause and effect is to his hearers. They want a world that is reliable and predictable and certain. But Jesus is making it clear that the world is not like that, and when you think it is, you blame a lot of victims who need your help, not your reproach and condemnation.

The families of those slaughtered by Pilate or killed by the falling tower needed help and comfort, not questions of character heaped on their lost loved ones. Remember in the story of the Good Samaritan, all the upstanding people, including the priest, avoided the beaten man in the ditch. They crossed over to the other side of the road. In some great measure they all believed the man laying in the ditch deserved to be there, and they avoided him. But the Samaritan, whom Jesus says

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is the model neighbor, makes no such assumption about the man. Instead the Samaritan helps the man who has done nothing wrong but be a victim of robbers.

Jesus refuses to give his followers a perfectly logical world. But then he also refuses to give them a purely random one either. Even as he says that the bad end the victims of Pilate and the falling tower was not punishment for sins, Jesus warns his hearers that if they do not repent, there will be consequences for them. This is a seeming contradiction. His hearers must have been tempted to say, "You can't have it both ways."

But Jesus' logic here is infallible, even if it is a paradox. Jesus knows that the world is complicated. Sometimes things happen for a reason. Sometimes they do not. And since you can't tell from the outside which awful things are accidental and which are consequences with causes, Jesus makes a brilliant move, a move of pure genius.

Jesus essentially directs his hearers in two ways. First, for those events which happen to others, you cannot know why they happen. So don't make negative assumptions, but help out instead. Be like the Good Samaritan. How hard it must have been to hear, but how true it was. You simply cannot tell from the outside whether someone's plight is accidental or caused, and Jesus says, it is not fair to jump to conclusions. Far better to assume innocence than guilt.

But the second direction he turns his hearers is toward themselves. You may not be able to see inside someone else, but you can see inside yourself. You can know your own motivations, your own offences, your own shortcomings, your own heart. Therefore, the desire to admonish someone about right and wrong need not go unfulfilled. But Jesus says, turn that desire on yourself, where you can better judge the need. Turn it on yourself, where you can actually do some good. Jesus tells his hearers that the only person into whose heart you can see is your own. Look there, change your ways, and save yourself from the consequences of your own malice, pride, apathy, greed, envy, jealousy, or whatever other thing you harbor there.

\*\*\* Before we end, there is one other thing we must take up. In the beginning of this story we learn that Jesus' hearers not only assume that other people get what they deserve, but also that what they get is often extreme and final. Such thinking not only posits a simple axiom of getting what you deserve, but a picture of a harsh and unbending God.

The fig tree is a counterexample. The fig tree has lived to the age it is supposed to produce figs. It is supposed to bear fruit by now. But it has not. The owner makes a quick and certain decision: cut it down! But the gardener argues for a second chance for the tree. The gardener asks for another year. He asks for a chance to cultivate it and fertilize it and see if he can bring it around.

Without pressing the metaphor too far, it seems clear that Jesus is introducing another dimension into the story. It is not much of a stretch to imagine

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that Jesus understands himself as the compassionate gardener who comes to cultivate and teach the reluctant and the unfruitful, to give them another chance, to see if he can bring them around so that they can escape the consequences they are headed to bring upon themselves. Jesus would rather we bear fruit than face punishment for failing to, and he is willing to give us every chance and encouragement to do so.

What a lot Jesus has taught in this brief passage! Don't jump to conclusions about other people's misfortune. You have no way of knowing they deserved it. Most likely they didn't. So, provide help rather than condemnation. On the other hand, look carefully inside yourself to see the places where you may be heading yourself to a bad end. And then, turn to Jesus for help. Let him teach you. Let him loosen the tight-packed narrow parts of yourself. Let him nourish the desolate parts of your soul. Let him make you a new creation that you may not be cut down but may bear fruit in abundance. For that is why he came. He came for you. Amen.

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