

Luke 13:1-9

"It isn't fair!"

Very few stories about Jesus present our Lord as such a harsh and judgmental person as does this Sunday's Gospel lesson. Some people "told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." Jesus answered: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were guiltier than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

With his tongue deeply embedded in his cheek, William Willimon wrote, "I arrive, breathless at the hospital. Running down the hall, I come at last to a little knot of family members, leaning on one another, eyes filled with terror and tears. Yes, she is still breathing, but the accident has badly damaged much of her body. Was she driving too fast? Did she have her mind on something else? Was she wearing a seat belt? And I, as Jesus' field representative, say, 'No, do you think she is a worse offender than you? I tell you, unless you repent you will all likewise perish.'"

I wonder what Jesus' audience said or asked about that horrible incident in the Temple. Most interpreters assume, on the basis of Jesus' answer, that the question was about the fairness or unfairness of it all. Implied in their questions or comments we hear, "If there is a God..." The rest of it may have been stated plainly: "How could He let this happen?" Or, more specifically, "Why did He let this happen."

The problem they presented probably dealt with the obvious unfairness of such a thing occurring in "church!" The slaughter occurred while those Galileans were doing their religious thing. How or why could it be? Jesus' answer goes to the heart of their question. They imply that God should repent. Jesus says that God never needs to repent...people always do! His equal comparison of what appears to be a "natural disaster" that hit seemingly innocent bystanders may be His way of downplaying the fact that the first tragedy took place in the Temple.

One suggested possibility is that the two events were actually related. It is known that, at one time, Pilate dipped deeply into the Temple treasury, siphoning off money to help pay for an aqueduct to convey water from a spring that was 30 miles away, into his palace in Jerusalem. Understandably, the Jews took exception to funding the Roman Governor's pet project with their temple donations. The evil prefect disguised a number of his personal troops and sent them to kill the ringleaders and biggest troublemakers.

If that is when the blood of the Galileans was spilled in the Temple, the possibility also looms that the "tower of Siloam" was part of that aqueduct project and its demise may have been from human retaliation, rather than natural disaster. I will admit that this suggestion presents a tidy little package, with political and rebel violence costing innocent lives, but the evidence to support it is slim.

The difficult truth is that Jesus lumped humanly initiated and natural disasters together and says: "Big deal! The rain and the sun come to the evil and to the just. The important thing is to get yourself right with God because death will also come to you. Whether it is sooner or later, peaceful or violent doesn't matter."

We don't like to hear that. We like neat little packages in life--good boys and girls get brownies. Bad ones get spanked. God has His own style of neatness. He does not send catastrophes upon the notorious sinners while normal sinners (you and I) only stub our toes on the coffee table. You see, blaming calamity on someone's behavior, like Job's "friends" blaming him for his sad estate, is an appealing way to deal with someone else's troubles. But it loses its appeal when we are the ones who are suffering!

The facts are that death comes to us all; repentance is required of us all; and fruit is expected from us all. That last one is revealed in the last verses of the lesson where Jesus told a parable about a fig tree. The owner of the vineyard came to check on that tree three years in a row. Each time it bore no fruit. On the third visit he told the gardener to turn it into firewood. The gardener said, "Sir, leave it alone for one more year and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

Some additional facts, however, are just as important. For instance, God's grace to us is even more inevitable than death. At the end of the age, we will not all die, but God's grace comes to every person who repents and turns by faith to Him--no exceptions at all!

Secondly, it is impossible to separate repentance from bearing fruit. During Lent, too many people confuse repentance with some sort of feeling sorry or guilty. Repentance has to do with realizing that God's ways and ours are often at odds. Our idea that life (or God) should conform to our notions of fairness is just one example.

It doesn't take a genius to recognize that Jesus' story about the fig tree is not a story about a tree. It is about people who represent God's own vineyard. If, like that tree, we are satisfied with just our image--giving a good impression of a fine, tall tree, but bearing no fruit--it is time for repentance!

The vineyard of God is a consistent Old Testament symbol for the people of Israel. There is no reason to assume Jesus would not use it to represent the people of His Church. Too many people today are satisfied with being "in" the church. He wants us to BE the church! The church isn't something we own. He owns it and we are to be doing His ministry and fulfilling His mission. Unlike a tree standing tall and dressing well in this season's leaves is not in our job description. Exercising our spiritual superiority over those less fortunate is even worse! (Keep an eye out for falling towers and trees.)

St. Augustine noticed that when barbarians sacked Rome, Christians and non-Christians suffered equally. Faith in Christ did not make people immune to tragedy. He wrote, in "City of God," "Christians differ from Pagans, not in the ills that befall them but in what they do with the ills that befall them." Faith doesn't give us a way around tragedy. It gives us a way through it.

Faith also gives us a way through life. It is foreign to the way we might see as "normal" or "practical" or even "right." Our "right" is often God's left or, more accurately, "wrong!" The Pharisees, priests and Roman soldiers thought it was "right" to crucify Jesus. What is mind-boggling is that Jesus did too! By any stretch of human imagination, could we say Jesus' crucifixion was fair? Even Pilate knew better.

Jesus' crucifixion is the one event that ought to make us permanently speechless whenever we try to bring our ideas of fairness to God's complaint department. Are we ready to tell God that we expect or demand better treatment than His Son received? I once heard someone say that he didn't really care for liver, but he liked liver and onions because, "When you smother it in onions, you can't really taste the liver." God's ways are smothered in mercy, love, grace, acceptance and compassion--not a taste of any

bitterness, resentment, hatred or rejection. Most of the people in the world know nothing about that. We must help them by speaking the gospel of Christ's sacrifice for sin and forgiveness in his blood to all who don't think life or even God is fair. Thank Him that he isn't fair or we would all be cut down and burned in the fire of the gardener's brush pile. Instead we receive freely and unworthily the grace and love of a Savior who knows us better and what we need better than we know ourselves and then provided it in his own death and resurrection. Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." Our hope and salvation is founded on the fact that Jesus allowed himself to perish on the cross so that we could repent and have forgiveness, peace and life in Him.