

THE FRUIT OF REPENTANCE

LUKE 13:1-9; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Have you ever noticed how a word or two from Jesus can change everything? How it can utterly upend expectations and assumptions? How it can take everything his hearers might previously have thought about how God works and how the world works and turn it on its head?

We see this frequently throughout the gospels.

Probably most famously, we see this in the famous *You have heard it said... But I say to you* passage from Matthew 5, where Jesus systematically pushes beyond the *letter* of the law to the *spirit* of the law:

- From not murdering to not being angry
- From not committing adultery to not lusting
- From not breaking oaths to being people of simplicity and truth
- From measuring out punishment in measured response to offenses to turning the other cheek
- From loving neighbour to loving even enemies

In each case, Jesus takes some settled truth from Israel's law—and changes the script.

We might think of Jesus' flouting of Sabbath requirements. Sabbath observance was (and remains) a *very* big deal for observant Jews. And Jesus was an observant Jew.

Yet on a number of occasions, Jesus sets aside the restrictions of the Jewish law in order to bring about healing and liberation for those in bondage (e.g., Matthew 12:1-14).

We see it in today's passage as well.

It begins with an implied question. *Some present told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.*

We don't know a great deal about the event itself.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, there were a group of Jewish pilgrims from Galilee who had made their way to the temple in Jerusalem. At that time, it wasn't uncommon for Jewish revolutionaries to spring up now and then, and these revolutionaries would often offer sacrifices at the temple, perhaps seeking divine blessing for their cause.

We don't really know much about the specific event Jesus was responding to in this passage, but we do know that Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, was no friend of the Jews, that he sometimes brought pagan symbols into Israel's temple to provoke them, and that, most of all, he was desperate to quell any potential riots and unrest.

Were these Galileans about to stir up trouble? Who knows? But whatever the case may be, it seems that Pilate simply commanded Roman troops to slaughter them right in the temple.

But presumably when people brought up this bit of news, they were not offering Jesus an FYI.

By the way, did you hear about those folks in Galilee who were slaughtered in the temple by the Roman governor?

No, they clearly had something else in mind. They were expecting Jesus to *explain* why such an awful thing could have happened. They wanted to know what it *meant*.

Jesus' unexpected response makes it clear that *he* thought they were looking for an explanation.

Do you think they were worse sinners than anyone else?

He even adds another story of suffering to the one presented to him. *What about those eighteen people that the Tower of Siloam fell on?*

The Tower of Siloam was in a region of central Jerusalem. Here, the devastation seems more tragic than malicious—it seems that a building had simply fallen and crushed a number of people.

Were they worse sinners than anyone else in Jerusalem? Jesus asks.

Did God orchestrate that tower to fall on those precise people at that precise moment because their misdeeds demanded it?

Is suffering a consequence for sin?

The answer would have been rather obvious to Jesus' hearers.

Well, um, yeah. That's kind of how it works, right? What else would we think? Isn't that the way God has set things up?

There are many places we could turn in the Bible for evidence for why people would assume this, but one of the readings from this week that we didn't have read aloud makes it pretty explicit.

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, the Apostle Paul rehearses some of the more unpleasant details of Israel's history wandering through the wilderness, including two instances where thousands of people were struck down for their sins of idolatry and sexual immorality.

In verse 6, he makes his point:

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.

Sin = suffering, says Paul. Straight line. *Learn the lesson and learn it well.*

At this point, we might be tempted to say, well we're not *that* naïve. We know that things are a bit more complicated than that!

But who among us hasn't encountered something in our own lives and asked, even if only in the privacy of our own minds, *Why is this happening to me? What did I do? Am I being punished for something?*

Or who among us hasn't seen some natural disaster in some desperate part of the world and wondered, *Why them? What did they do?*

Each of us—perhaps whether we are “religious or not”— seems to have this assumption that the world ought to work a certain way, that good ought to be repaid with good and evil with evil.

That there ought to be a kind of moral symmetry between our behaviour and the quality of our experience. That bad things shouldn't happen to good people.

It is an expectation that is as peculiar as it is commonplace. A quick glance at the world around us ought to make this plain enough. Bad things are always happening to relatively “good” people.

Catastrophic tragedies seem to strike with maddening arbitrariness and unpredictability. Disease indiscriminately strikes down the young, the old, and those in between. The innocent suffer all the time and all over the place.

If one were to look only at empirical evidence, the idea that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people is absurd.

Yet we expect the world to make moral sense! And we expect Jesus to *know* what we expect and to *validate* it!

So did those present in our text this morning.

But Jesus doesn't validate this expectation.

He doesn't say, *Ah, yes, well let me tell you about **those** particular Galileans... They were a particularly nasty bunch and they got what was coming to them...* He doesn't say, *Those eighteen people crushed by the falling tower? You should have seen what their private lives looked like!*

Yet again, he upends assumptions and takes the conversation in an unexpected direction. He changes the script.

No, I tell you...

No, these people's suffering was not because they were any better or worse sinners than anyone else.

No, you can't make those explicit connections and you shouldn't try.

(He did this even more explicitly in John 9 when people brought to him a man born blind, demanding to know whose sin had caused it.)

There is sin and there is suffering in the world, but your task is not to connect the dots and present the explanations.

Why?

I think there are a number of reasons, but surely near the top of the list would be because Jesus knows us too well.

He knows that we human beings are notoriously good at abusing such "explanations"—that we *tend* to be much more interested in applying these formulas to *others* than to ourselves.

That our explanations about the connection between sin and suffering often say much more about *ourselves* than they do about God.

We see this all the time. Nearly every time there is a natural disaster, we expect some Christian leader somewhere to pop up and confidently declare which group of sinners is responsible for the suffering.

And it usually happens to be a group of sinners whose sin the one making the judgment is least prone to and finds most odious. Sins that we happen not to be tempted by are usually the ones that we're quick to say others are being punished for!

God seems to quite reliably get angrier at *other* people's sins than our own!

It happens, more painfully, on personal levels as well. I have heard too many stories to remember of well-meaning Christians who, when faced with an unexpected sickness or terminal diagnosis of a loved one, begin to hunt around for sin or lack of faith in their lives. And guilt and anger are piled on to physical suffering.

So, to this whole game of pinning specific instances of suffering to specific sins, Jesus says, NO.

Kim Fabricius puts it well in a recent sermon on this passage:

Jesus impatiently dismisses this kind of populist theology. And why? Because it assumes that God is basically just like us (only... bigger and more powerful)—an idol whose mind we can read and whose purposes we can plot. **Because it is inevitably and conveniently self-serving—a deity who endorses our own personal and religious agenda.**

But, above all, because it is morally unintelligible, because it expresses a grotesque distortion of the character of God, the God we know not in natural suffering or human evil, but in Jesus—the one who is never vindictive, vengeful, or violent, the one who is always gracious, merciful, and peaceful, the one who would rather absorb than inflict suffering, the one who would rather die than kill.¹

So Jesus says no to assigning sin to suffering. What does he say “yes,” to?

Again, we are in for a surprise. Where we might expect Jesus to say something like, *Well, you see the world is a broken place and we need to have grace for those who suffer, whether deserved or undeserved*, he says,

Repent. Or you, too, will perish.

Ouch.

¹ http://www.faith-theology.com/2016/02/sermon-for-lent-3-heads-up-from-jesus.html?fb_action_ids=10153910687371894&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_ref=.Vs-ie4DpWXt.like

Again, Jesus departs from the script we might expect or prefer.

Yes, horrible things happen, Jesus says. Yes, there is suffering and pain and injustice. Yes there are people whose wills seem perpetually bent away from God's purposes and plans for the world. Yes, people continue to refuse the way that leads to peace.

But what about you?

Which way are you going? What is the path your life is taking? Are you oriented properly toward God? Are you choosing the things that lead to life and peace or contributing to the things that lead to death?

Jesus makes the conversation very personal very quickly.

Jesus knows that our questions about the connection between sin and suffering very often have impure motives to blame others lurking in the background.

SO, Jesus keeps the focus where we need to keep the focus. On ourselves. On our own lives, our own souls.

Our Lenten theme is "Living Ink" and today's theme is "Leaping off the Page." The focus statement for this week was:

God, the Author of the grand story, invites us to... the good news that we are part of an abundant narrative. As we do, we become living words that leap off the page into all aspects of relations: with God, each other, and the earth.

It's a theme that I initially thought didn't fit this Scripture passage about sin and suffering very well.

But when I read the conclusion of today's passage from Luke, it made a bit more sense.

Our passage today ends with an image of abundance. Or at least the *possibility*, the *hope* of abundance.

It ends with a parable. A story about a fig tree in a vineyard, about a gardener looking for fruit.

It would have been a very familiar kind of story for Jesus' listeners, because this kind of "agricultural" metaphor echoes throughout the pages of Scripture.

As Christians, we are part of a story that begins in a garden in Genesis and ends with a tree of life in Revelation. A story that begins and ends in abundance.

Jesus' parable at the end of our passage today focuses on a solitary fruitless fig tree. This barren fig tree will be given a year; if it doesn't start to produce fruit, it will be cut down.

An encounter that begins with abstract questions about the connection between human sin and suffering, ends with a conversation about fruit.

I know that you want answers, Jesus says. I know that you want to understand how things work so that you can predict, manage, control... Or, less charitably, so that you can have a religious weapon or two to use against your enemies...

But I am interested in fruit.

So why don't you get busy tending your garden? Why don't you worry about what you *can* control? Your own choices. Your own responses. Your own obligation to choose the way in which you will walk in this world where bad things and good things and in-between things are always happening!

None of us will avoid suffering. Or sin, for that matter. But each one of us can make daily decisions to live fruitful lives, to tend and fertilize and water what we have been given.

Earlier, in Luke 3:8-9, Jesus tore into the Pharisees, calling them a brood of vipers, saying: "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

Repentance and fruit go together.

May God help us, as we near the halfway point of this Lenten season, to be people who produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The fruit of lives that are always being reoriented toward the lives we were created for.

Lives of generosity, honesty, and trust. Lives of hope and peace and service to others.
Lives of love.

May God help us to be fruitful.

Amen.

