

SERMON
“Unless You Repent”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Luke 13: 1-9

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

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. 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?” He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

SERMON

As Jesus was speaking about judgment, news came to him about a terrible tragedy. Pontius Pilate had massacred Galilean pilgrims who went to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. This was a catastrophe of the highest order, but nothing out of the ordinary for Pilate. That's the way he managed the Jews. Reverend Willimon suggests, "When you've got a foreign army occupying somebody's else's country, even though you may not want to be brutal, as we found out in our occupation of Iraq, it is hard to be an enforcer of occupation values without resorting to grave violence."¹

To this report of slaughter, Jesus made a curious response. If somebody came rushing in here today telling us that a group on pilgrimage from our church had been slaughtered, my hunch is we would respond with, "Oh my God!", and move into a state of shock trying to figure out what to do next. But maybe, if you're exposed to terror often enough, you become desensitized to its horror. Maybe another car bombing, over time, registers like a speeding ticket does for us.

For whatever the reason, Jesus responds with a question. A sure sign he sees this as a teachable moment. **He asks, "Now I suppose you think these Galileans were sinners above all other Galileans, because they suffered such things?"**

On Ash Wednesday, I had asked Deb to invite the Day School into the sanctuary to talk about the meaning of this day, so Deb arranged for all the children to join us as she received her ashes. This we did during the last 10 minutes of my prayer time in the sanctuary, and all went well. Extremely well, actually. Watching the faces of those children will stay with me for a lifetime. But that's not why I tell you this story. Looking at Deb with her ashes and the children

¹ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, "Judgmental Jesus?" p. 42

with theirs – I wanted some. So I stretched out the bowl of ashes to Deb and said, “Here. You do me!”

Deb told me later that my request came as a shock. She was surprised that I would ask her to do my imposition of ashes. You know since I’m the one who handles the sacred things around here—as if the rest of you can’t. With shaking hands Deb dabbed me with a pretty heavy dose of ashes. Right after this I went to hospital to visit Earl. The woman at the information desk stared at me for awhile and finally said, “That’s about the heaviest dose of ashes I’ve ever seen. You must be a really big sinner!”

Well that equation, heavy ashes equals big sinner, makes more sense to me than, massacred pilgrims making sacrifices equals the biggest of all sinners. I was stumped that Jesus would think they thought those slaughtered **Galileans were sinners above all other Galileans**. So off to the biblical commentaries I went to find out what was going on in the world the day Jesus asked such a question. This I discovered.

The question speaks to an answer often given in ancient times about the reason suffering befalls certain people. When premature death came from catastrophe, many believed, the disaster happened because God was angry. There was wide spread belief in the **doctrine of retribution**, the doctrine that those who are recipients of disaster must be guilty of some great sin.

Now the application of this doctrine usually tended to be more than a little opinionated and one sided—hence, the teachable moment. If catastrophe happened to someone you liked or was like you, then the sinner was the one who caused the catastrophe and was due retribution. If catastrophe befell someone you did not like at all or who was different from you, then the sinner was the victim of the catastrophe.

Based on this I don't think Jesus expected them to answer positively with a resounding, "Yes, these Galileans were the biggest sinners ever." My hunch is that they were as surprised by Jesus' question as I, for they did not harbor thoughts that the victims of the massacre were sinners. They were fellow Galileans, people liked them, who were coming to **repent** for their sins. This was righteous behavior that would have pleased, not angered God. Anyone doing harm to someone at such a moment was despicable. This was clearly a case where the one who caused the catastrophe, Pontius Pilate, was due retribution. Didn't Jesus see this?

The minute Jesus has them thinking this way. He turns the tables. "Well then," he continues, "how about the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were the worst offenders of all others living in Jerusalem?"

Here's where commentaries come in handy. I knew nothing about this incident in Siloam. Turns out, there were Jews who had been employed by the Romans to build aqueducts. You see, Pilate had decided very rightly that Jerusalem needed a new and improved water supply. The problem was that in order to finance the water system, Pilate took money from the temple treasury. The idea of his using temple money, for even a worthwhile project, had many Jews angry. They were especially angry with their fellow Jews who agreed to work on the aqueduct. So when some were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, many applied the doctrine of retribution to the victims of this catastrophe.

To both of these situations, Jesus answers, "No, I tell you!" And then he admonished them to repent. Some historical background makes it clear that Jesus wanted them to see how ridiculous the equation of tragic death equals sinners is. And he wanted them to repent over the double standard they used in deciding who they thought God should punish, and in so doing, they stamped them with the scarlet letter as sinners above all other sinners. Maybe he even

wished for them to understand how insane the doctrine of retribution, whether in reference to either of those who had suffered, or those they thought...ought to suffer.

You may well be saying, “But what has this got to do with us?” No one really believes any more that when something tragic happens in the world, it is a sign of God’s retribution. Well, maybe not in the circle where we hang, but it certainly exists among the Jerry Falwell, the Pat Robertsons, and their followers.

The day following the earth quake that rocked major destruction and brought forth devastating suffering, Pat Robertson said, “Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French, uh, you know, Napoleon the third or whatever, and they got together and swore a pact to the devil; they said, we will serve you, if you get us free from the Prince. And so the devil said, “OK, it’s deal.”² In other words, God rained down terror on the Haitians because of their past sins.

“No, I tell you,” says Jesus, “but unless you repent Pat Robertson, you will perish as they did.”

Then there are all the past remarks of Jerry Falwell, who is no longer with us, but whose followers still push his beliefs as Christian beliefs. “AIDS,” Jerry said, “is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals; it is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.”

“No, I tell you,” says Jesus. “Unless you repent Jerry Falwell, you will perish as they did.”

And this day, Jesus says to our finger-pointing and blame that we place on others for the woes of the world, “No, I tell you. Unless you repent Becky Hebert, you will perish as they did.”

This is the second lesson of Lent. First comes our time in the wild, determining what the temptations are to which we surrender. The second lesson involves repentance, which means a turning from temptations to go the way of growth and maturity in our faith—to take

² As reported by Rev. William E. Albert, “The Sacrifice of Haiti,” p.1

responsibility for the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells in us that want to heap accountability on the victim or the perpetrator, on anyone but ourselves.

A man owned a vineyard, the produce from which earned him his livelihood. In the midst of this vineyard he planted a fig tree. From this particular tree, the man did not plan to gather or sell produce. He planted it for his own pleasure. He planted this tree so he could enjoy the sweet fruit it would eventually produce. Each year, he came looking to see how the tree was doing. And each year he discovered no fruit. For three years he did this, which by the way, is the time needed for a fig tree to reach maturity. In the third year, at the point when the fig tree should have reached maturity but had not, Jesus said to the gardener, “Look at that fig tree! For three years I have come looking for fruit on that tree and still there is none. Cut it down! Why should I waste my soil on the likes of it?”

Thank God for the gardener—the One who intercedes on our behalf—and overrules those naysayers who say we deserve to be cut down. “Sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it, fertilize it, and nurture it so this tree can grow into its maturity. It’s just a slow starter. Give it another year to produce fruit for you.”

Lent is about not getting off the hook. It’s about taking sin seriously, death seriously, everything more seriously. It’s about facing it all squarely to claim responsibility for the part we play in the scheme of things. It is about repenting and turning away from our old non-productive ways. And it is about us maturing in our faith...before it is too late.

How will we know that we are changing for the better and growing towards maturity in our faith? We will know by the fruit we bear—not by Sunday’s attendance numbers and not by the size of our bank balance—but, by the good fruit we bear. The prayer shawls with which we wrap people in comfort. The food we share with the hungry. The stranger who found us on Ash

Wednesday and is returning with her youth group to walk our labyrinth. We know by the letters we write to encourage of legislators to do right by the hungry, and the people we invite into our home when they are homeless. Lent, in its darkness, points us away from the doom's day declarers to the rays of hope manifesting all around us.

Like it does today! Today, Mason Cunningham comes to us to receive the sacrament of baptism. What a bright ray of hope and responsibility God gives us this day!

Amen.

Would Adam, Kim and Mason Cunningham please come forward—and Mason, grandparents, and the godparents-to-be?