

“Covered by Manure . . . and the Amazing Grace of God”

Luke 13:1-9

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Third Sunday of Lent, March 24th, 2019
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We are always interested in “why.” We want reasons. There’s nothing wrong with this. We are curious people. In journalism school I was asked to approach every story with the five ws and h: who, what, when, where, why, and how. We want events in our lives to have meaning.

In the scene in Luke’s gospel we find Jesus having a conversation with curious followers. They have been reading the newspapers. Bad things were still happening to good people and they wanted to know why. What was the purpose of that suffering?

There were Galileans who were at the temple making sacrifices to God. Pilate, apparently, attacked and killed some or all of them. Jesus knew that the crowd wants this senseless tragedy to make sense, and so he asks them: *Did these Galileans suffer because they were sinners? Did God allow this to happen because they were, even, worse sinners than other Galileans?* This would make sense. That would explain things. God allowed these “bad eggs” to die because they were sinners.

He asks another question:

What about the 18 people killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Did they somehow deserve this because they ran with the wrong crowd? Had their sin gotten God good and mad?

We want suffering to make sense. If “bad” people suffer because they deserve it, for many of us that makes suffering make sense.

On Wednesday I gathered with a dozen folk from this church, and about a hundred other religious people in our town at the Mosque in Urbana. We had gathered at our Muslim neighbors’ invitation to pray with them in the wake of the terrible shooting in New Zealand that left fifty dead. Muslims had been worshipping in the town of Christchurch and were murdered while they prayed, while they knelt, why they sang.

The Mosque had pictures on a screen of all the victims. Their names were printed with a few words about them. Husah Ahmed was “the picture of strength.” Anisi Alabava was “graduating in May.” Matullah Safi was “a humble man.” Talha, Mohammed, Zeeshan, Zakariah, Abdus. Their faces. Their names. Their carefree, contented smiles. And the prayers spoken with such heavy hearts.

Some of us in that crowd on Wednesday wanted to know “why.” What possible meaning did this massacre have?

Here in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus gives us little help.

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Jesus was aware of the Old Testament idea that God blesses good people, and God curses bad people. If you follow the Torah, you will be rewarded. If you don’t follow the Torah, you will not be rewarded. This way of thinking is probably describes where this crowd in Luke is coming from.

But this is not where Jesus is coming from.

Did sin cause this suffering? Did God punish these potentially “bad” people?

Jesus is clear. His answer is “NO.”

Job spends a long time grappling with questions like this. Why did he, a righteous man, suffer so badly? The book of Job is 42 chapters long. If you want to explore more deeply why suffering comes, turn to Job.

But here in Luke’s gospel, Jesus wants to talk about something else. He doesn’t want to talk about the meaning of death, but, rather, about the meaning of life.

Jesus is telling us, *death comes for us all, but how do you want to live?* Reading between the lines, Jesus is asking us: *Are you right with God? There is still time for you to repent, to turn away from sin, and to turn towards God.* Jesus is suggesting a change of heart, a conversion, a reformation. Look into God’s face. Lean into God’s work. Celebrate God’s good. There’s not a lot of time to change your ways, but there is some time.

There’s an urgency in Jesus’ tone, do you hear it? Change now—*before it’s too late.*

Then Jesus does what Jesus does often and best: He tells a story. A man planted a fig tree in his garden, but after three years it had not yielded fruit so he told the gardener to chop it down, dig it up, make space for something productive.

The gardener—and how can one not be reminded of God when one looks at the gardener?—slows the man down. *Look, this fig has had its chance. But what harm does it do to allow it a little more time? I’ll put manure on it. I’ll give it good care. I’ll aerate the soil. I’ll water. I’ll tend. I’ll studiously watch. I’ll patiently wait. If it doesn’t bear fruit by next year, let’s cut it down then. But for now, for now let’s give it more nurture and more time.*

I wonder if what Adlai Stevenson of nearby Bloomington often said in his speeches might be getting at what Jesus wants us to take away from this passage from Luke’s gospel: “It’s not how many years that are in your life, it’s how much life is in your years.”

Certainly, Jesus wants life for his followers, and he wants them to have it abundantly. It’s not that Jesus isn’t interested in past hurts; it seems he’s more interested in the future. Be fully alive, he urges. Turn towards God. Get your lives in shape. Bear fruit. Be productive. Find cures to cancer. Make cars safe. Become an architect and build towers that won’t fall down. Live alternatives to violence in such a way that governments won’t slaughter their people. Bring healing to those who suffer. Laugh with those who laugh; sit with those who grieve. Be a good neighbor. Be fully alive to the amazing graces that abound around you.

God, the gardener, is giving us the love we need, the time we need, the water we need, the care we need. God is giving us the opportunity.

With God’s help, let’s take it.

AMEN.

Luke 13:1-9

¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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?' ⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Affirmation of Faith Philippians 2:3-11

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.