

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
March 12, 2017

Luke 13:1-9; 31-35

Now there were some present at that time who 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 eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' "'Sir,' the man replied, '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.'" At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

### **The Penitent Heart**

One night this past week I was walking towards the door of Brookdale, the assisted living facility where my Dad now lives, when a worker came out the door with her head hanging down. As I greeted her, I noticed she was in tears. Her daughter's best friend, a young man only 28 years old, had died in his sleep that day. Her daughter had just learned of it and was understandably distraught. The worker looked distraught too. She was heading home to comfort her daughter, even as she herself was grieving.

On any given day such things happen. Tough news comes, death come too soon. Sometimes – as when families, or young girls in an orphanage, or young people in a nightclub die in a fire, such things make the news. Other times death is merely a listing in the obituary column. But always, I think, tough news – the trials of others -- tears at our hearts.

So what do we do with this passage, with the odd way Jesus responds?

The first thing to notice is that Jesus seems, in a way, to deepen the wound. The people come to him, lamenting a tragedy, innocent people slain in the temple no

less. It is an injustice, and someone, Herod, had a hand in it. Jesus responds not by listening and softly shaking his head, not by calling Herod the bully he surely was but by challenging the way bad things were often interpreted by people in his day – namely, the idea that everything that happens in life is a result of whether you’ve pleased God or not.

See, it was common thinking in ancient times that if you, say, had many children, God had smiled upon you. Likewise if you were rich, God was blessing you for how good and righteous you were. Good things are the reward for being good.

Clearly Jesus doesn’t believe it works this way, as the people report this atrocity in the temple, Jesus brings up another sorrowful occurrence, this one perhaps having less human agency, though towers do fall due to poor engineering. In each case he brings up the same question: Do you think these people who died were worse offenders than others who lived in Jerusalem?

Twice Jesus says No. No, this is not the way it works. Sometimes sin makes bad things happen. If a person constructs a bridge on the cheap and it falls, sin, certainly human complicity, had a hand in that.

But if someone is riding on that bridge that falls, and they are killed or injured...well, again Jesus is challenging the idea that for that person that is anything but random bad luck. Jesus is saying we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sometimes terrible things come upon us. Sometimes things just happen.

Yesterday I had the privilege of having a theological conversation with some newcomers to our church. We were looking at the United Church of Christ’s brief statement of faith, and the topic of blessing came up. Someone commented on the way people on Facebook share how they are on vacation, you know the pictures of tropical beaches and sunsets and yummy meals served outdoors. “We are so blessed they say in their posts. But they shouldn’t use the word that way!” this person said. I know I laughed. Really, does God bless some people with Caribbean vacations while the rest of us are preparing for yet another snowstorm in March?

Many years ago we knew a man named Leo Braconnier. Leo had had a heart transplant, he’d also had cancer of the tongue...he’d been through a lot. Leo volunteered his time being a clown at the local hospital, and sometimes Leo went in to Philadelphia to children’s hospital to do his clowning gig. At first, Leo said, I used to say Why Me? Now I say Why Not Me? Leo also wondered how it was that when bad things happen people often ask Why Me but when good things come their way they seldom ask that, Why Me? There is a sense we’ve earned our good fortune. Hard work, reward, this is so much of the American way.

One morning this week, on a partial day off, I headed to the beach with my husband Mike. We were at Ellisville Beach, where you sometimes see seals, Mike slowly making his way along, gathering rocks for future projects, while I took a quick stroll for further exercise. I was thinking about life, about ministry about how

encountering so much death and sorrow did sometimes take a toll when there, on the beach, there was this dead seal, a seal carcass, some of it down to bone. I wasn't sure if it was old age, or maybe a shark attack got this seal, it didn't quite seem like the full body was all there. I was walking on the beach, trying I think to escape the reality of death, and death was there too.

I found myself staring at the dead seal. He too had his time. Her time to fish, his time to frolic in the water, her time perhaps to bob up and down, staring at people walking along Ellisville Beach. In a similar way, we all of us have lifetimes. And we simply don't know how long our lives will be. One day we too will be as still as that seal on the beach.

A preacher once said when preaching on this passage that they were tempted to begin their sermon by singing "Loudly and Pointedly Jesus is calling". There is something about death, be it human or animal, be it tragic or not, that commands our attention. I think of Ash Wednesday when we wear ashes on our heads, and consider anew the reality of our mortality. I think of Jesus in his encounter with distraught people and how yes there is a call of sorts going on here.

Here's the thing: when Jesus says repent, turn to God or you too will perish, he is not saying perish in the sense that you too will be killed in some disastrous way. He is not even saying wake up and realize that one day you too will die. He is saying less about death and more about life: namely if you live completely unto yourself, or go in with the world's corrupt ways, if you lack the capacity to be a self, that is, to say the capacity to be self-aware, you may be in mortal danger, you *soul* may be in peril, you might be actually living a kind of living death. So Jesus, in the midst of these trying times, with blood and rubble on the ground has people's attention, and he uses it to ask What about you? How will you live the life you have to live?  
(Matt Skinner, Working Preacher website)

This week my husband attended his poetry group, where one member of the group confessed she had no poem to offer, being simply too distraught about the election. We probably all know someone who might say something like that. It has been a disconcerting and fractious time for our country, something that many people tell me shakes them to their core. But where it is paralyzing for some, for others it is motivating. As a pastor, I've observed a kind of renewed interest in the deeper questions, the questions that have to do with the quality of our lives. How am I living? Is it for self or for others? How can I better attend to my relationships? How can I live with a deeper sense of gratitude? How can I find ways to work for kind of world I want to live in?

The fractious and tumultuous quality of our national life has captured our attention for where we put our energy. If you don't like the word "repentance" think of it perhaps as re-direction. Either way we are turning from self-absorption (our own) to the mercy and faithfulness of God, and to a deeper curiosity about what God makes possible, not only in the world, but within us.

Eventually in our passage today Jesus redirects his own attention, from the people and their questions, from teaching about the Kingdom to a lament for Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the seat of organized religion, and yet over and over again the people who dwell there reject those who come offering truth. Jesus speaks of himself as a mother hen, who wants to gather up her chicks not only to protect them, I think, but to bring them closer to life, life lived in fullness and openness to God's justice and love.

This Lent Jesus is going after all our defenses, all our distorted ways of looking at things. It's important to remember, he's doing this in love. He's really asking us the question poet Mary Oliver asks. What are you going to do with your one wild and precious life? And the urging is always turn to God who loves you most patiently with a fig tree kind of love.

Amen.