

Lent 3, Year C

March 24, 2019

Luke 13:1 *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 all perish as they did. Or 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? 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.'"*

In his book, "*The Bible Tells Me So*,"¹ Peter Enns addresses some of the most disturbing parts of the Old Testament that have turned many people away from the Bible – like God commanding genocide. One of the points Dr. Enns makes is that we need to take the Biblical accounts and traditions in their historical and cultural contexts. Like many other scholars, he stresses that Jesus was a First Century Jew who would have interpreted the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) like rabbis did at that time, and would have taught as rabbis taught. After all, the disciples often call Jesus, "Rabbi" (translated in our Bibles as "Teacher").

Now, one of the teaching techniques of the rabbis in Jesus' day was hyperbole – exaggerated comments to make a point.² Perhaps the most famous of these is when Jesus teaches that if your eye offends you, you are to pluck it out, and if your hand offends you, you are to cut it off. (Matthew 5:29, 18:9; Mark 9:47)

And it sure sounds to me like Jesus is using that same shockingly hyperbolic teaching technique in today's reading from Luke, when he says that if his hearers do not repent, do not change their hearts and minds, they will suffer the same fate as certain Galileans whom Pilate had slaughtered in the Temple; or some 18 other unfortunate people who were crushed by a falling tower. Luke's Jesus uses very strong language in these chapters leading up to his entry into Jerusalem, as we see not only in *today's* reading but in the very next Chapter, when Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me and does not *hate* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) Now, I don't know of a single Bible scholar, even those who take the Bible most literally, who doesn't believe that Jesus is using hyperbole here. Jesus is **not** advocating literally cutting off our hands, plucking out our eyes, or hating our fathers and mothers. He is using hyperbole to make a point.

In today's Gospel, *before* he gets to the hyperbolic language, Jesus wants to clear up a common misconception among the Jewish people: the misconception that every bad thing that happens to us must be God's punishment for something we have done wrong, and every good thing that happens to us must be God's reward for our righteousness. Jesus wants to sever the strong connection between tragedy and sinfulness which is prevalent through much of the Torah (especially in the Book of Deuteronomy³). The final editor of Deuteronomy believed that *everything* that happens to us in life happens as a consequence of our righteousness or sinfulness and God's respective reward or punishment. Even though the Book of Job strongly challenged (if not contradicted) this mindset, it was still floating around in Jesus' day, as evidenced in John's Gospel, where Jesus' disciples, upon meeting a man born blind, ask, "Who sinned – this man or his parents – that he was born blind?" **Twice** in today's Gospel, Jesus *severs* the connection between tragedy and God's punishment for sin. Jesus states that the Galileans whom Pilate killed were no more sinful than any other Galileans. The 18 people upon whom the Tower of Siloam fell were no worse sinners than anyone else in Jerusalem. Every tragedy that happens to people **doesn't** take place because God willed it! That young child did not die of cancer "because God needed another angel in Heaven." The disease of AIDS was not invented by God to punish homosexuals and prostitutes (as some fundamentalist Christians in the 1980's argued).

Jesus could not be more clear about this than in today's Gospel.

But there is another point that Jesus wants to make in today's passage, perhaps the main point; and this is where the hyperbole comes in. After severing the connection between tragedy and God's punishment, Jesus turns right around and says – **twice** in today's passage – "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Now how confusing is that? Jesus *first* says that tragedies happening to folk are **not** the result of God's punishment for their evil ways; and then in the next breath he says, "But if you don't repent, you will perish just like they did." Isn't he contradicting what he has just said?

No; and the reason we don't see this is that we hear the word "repent" and we interpret it to mean, "shape up and act good." But that is NOT what the word "repent" means. Quite literally, the word repent (*metanoeo* in the Greek) means "to change your mind." As the word is used by Jesus, it means more than just changing your *mind*; it means a transformation of one's very life. The command, "Repent!" really means "Be changed – transformed into your True Self, into Christ, living into the new reality of God's Kingdom."

What Jesus is doing with the crowd in today's Gospel is re-directing their focus. The people ask Jesus, "What do you think about those Galileans that Pilate slaughtered?" But Jesus knows that *no one is ever spiritually transformed by*

focusing on “those others”. No one is changed by the question, “What about *them*?” After Jesus’ resurrection in John’s Gospel, Peter asks Jesus about what is going to happen to the “beloved disciple,” and Jesus responds, “What is that to you? Your calling is to follow me!” (John 21:21-22)

But isn’t that what we *love* to do? Focus on **other** people’s situations, critique them, pass judgment on them, while avoiding important changes needed in our own interior lives? We love to critique the speck in the other person’s eye while ignoring the log in our own eye – ignoring the changes WE need to make in our own lives. John Shea says about the people in today’s Gospel who are engaging Jesus in conversation, “They are asking about the fate of *others*, and suddenly [Jesus faces them] with their **own** fate... People must look *inside* to be in touch with the will of God and *then* make that will happen in the events of their [own] lives. **They** are the ones who bring God’s will onto the earth. ...Leave to the fabrications of the mind the question of whether terrible events are God’s will. The will of God that is *beyond* debate is that we change and produce fruit, that we bring heaven to earth.”⁴ (pp. 77-78)

“[For] the divine will is not in outer events, but in the soul where the person is connected to God. The path of contacting and enacting the divine will is [**first**] to go within and *then* to go out.”⁴ (*ibid.*, p. 79) When we first connect and unite with God and God’s Spirit within our own souls, *then* when we **act** in the world, “we carry the divine will with us. God’s will is done in and through us.”⁴ (*ibid.*, p. 79)

When we ask God in the Lord’s Prayer that His “will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” “the assumption of the prayer is that God’s will is **not** [*presently*] being done on earth. Therefore, to look at the events of the earth to find God’s will [as the people in today’s Gospel do] is to look in the wrong direction. It is in the heavenly space of prayer that we touch this will and it is in the struggles of the earth that we enact it.”⁴

Jesus uses a gardening image in our Gospel when he says that he will do everything in his power to cultivate and nourish the fig tree (us) in order to help it bear fruit – to help it “bear God’s being and love into the world.”⁴ We are to let the Divine Gardener do his work in the garden of our souls. Loosening up the soil binding our roots so tightly that no life-giving air can get in (disturbing us in our rooted complacency and habitual patterns). Spreading manure around us. (Which nourishes us, but is not always pleasant). Pruning us where needed. (Growth requires letting go of certain parts of our lives.) This is the **true** work of repentance, and it is the Divine Gardener who does most of the heavy lifting. *Our* part is to keep the gate to the Garden Plot of our soul open for him to come and go and do His work in us. We must be *willing* to have the hard soil at our roots broken up and turned over, the sometimes-unpleasant (yet helpful) manure spread around us, the unfruitful or energy-depleting parts of us pruned. When we do this, when we keep the gate of our soul open to the Divine Gardener, inviting him to do his work of cultivating, fertilizing, and pruning, then the image of God, that

divine life implanted in us from the time we were a seed, will grow inevitably and inexorably, and the fruit of God's love will be borne on our branches for the feeding of a love-starved world.

AMEN

¹ Enns, Peter, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014

² "Rabbi Ammi said, The Torah Speaks in hyperbole, the prophets speak in hyperbole and the Sages speak in hyperbole." – from The Talmud

³ "...the Deuteronomic editors were convinced that the vicissitudes of Israel's history, from the outset, were directly linked by cause and effect to the people's fidelity or infidelity to Yahweh..." from *The Book of the Former Prophets* by Thomas W. Mann; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011, p. 64

⁴ John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 76-80