



## ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

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Luke 13:1-9

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### "The Patient Gardener"

*"Why me, why now? What did I do to deserve this? Am I being punished for the choices I've made, for bad behavior, for sin?"*

How many times have we uttered those words, either out loud or under our breath? Those painful words are nothing new to us, whether we want to admit it or not. Suffering is nothing new to us. For thousands of years humans have been suffering with the question of WHY.

Disaster strikes and we wonder what we've done wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in hopes that we can stop the excruciating pain. Often times we are less interested in the truth of the matter and more interested in the consequences. ***In our hunt for the cause, what we ultimately crave is control over the chaos of our lives!!***

Surely if we could find the cause and stop doing it, then the suffering would stop?

When I was working as a Chaplain, late one night I was called into the emergency room to meet with the family of a patient. As I walked around the corner, through the curtain I could see a young woman lying over the patient, crying. As I got closer to the young woman I could hear her saying, "Mama I'm sorry, if I could take it back I would. I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm so sorry. God don't take my mama, take me instead, it's all my fault."

Once the lady calmed down some she explained to me that she and her mother were arguing, yelling at each other, when her mother started complaining of a headache and passed out. When they got to the hospital they found out she had an aneurism of the brain. The Dr. told them that often times a person's blood pressure goes up very high before this happens.

Immediately the daughter began to blame herself, thinking their arguing had caused her mother's blood pressure to go up, causing the aneurism. She told all of us, "God's punishing me for being mean to my mama."

The Dr. tried to convince her that it wasn't her fault, that these things just happen, but she didn't want to hear it. Just being in the room with the daughter, you could feel the immense pain she was feeling.

Blaming herself, looking for an answer to the suffering, was easier than facing the reality of her mother's condition. If she blamed it on their argument then it made sense and she had some control of the situation.

In today's Gospel lesson from Luke, the people gathered around Jesus seem to be asking the same age-old question of whether people deserve the bad things that happen to them. They begin to tell him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And although Luke doesn't divulge the people's motive for sharing that story with Jesus, it appears they're asking if the Galileans got what they deserved.

Jesus quickly responds to them with a question, ***"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans?"***

***It's a tempting equation that would solve a lot of problems for us.***

- 1.) It would answer the riddle of why bad things happen to good people. Well under this assumption, they don't, bad things only happen to bad people, right? The more we sin, the more we suffer. *Whew*, well if I'm not as bad as the person sitting next to me then I'm doing ok, I'm safe.
- 2.) This tit-for-tat equation punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone.
- 3.) And clearly it gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. This must be how it works. It makes sense.

***It's a tempting equation, but Jesus won't go there!***

***NO!*** He tells the crowd, ***"but unless you repent, you will perish as they did."*** Jesus makes it clear that there is no connection between the suffering and the sin. Whew, we're safe again. But...Jesus also reiterates, unless you repent you're going to lose a lot of blood just like those Galileans. OH! So maybe we do need to rethink this equation a bit.

***Our God cannot be simplified to a God of physics. He is a living God, of life, of death, of resurrection. There are no physics to explain that!***

***Jesus doesn't honor our illusion that we can protect ourselves by sinning less or finding a cause for the effect.*** But our fear is tweaked by His call to "repent or perish" -- or at least mine is -- and that's not such a bad thing.

I remember when I was about 7 or 8 years old I went through a stage of asking my parents, "would you still love me if I..." fill in the blank...If I broke the lamp in your bedroom...If I never did my homework...If I ran away from home, would you still love me? Obviously I was testing the limits. My parents answer was always, "yes of course we'll still love you, but we won't be happy with the things you've done, and we'll probably put you in time out." For me, time out was the little chair at my tea table in the kitchen. When I was bad, I had to sit there for 10 or 15 minutes facing the wall. It was torture. Try staying completely quiet for 15 minutes when you're 7. It was hard. Well it's still hard ***for me.***

The point is...my parents didn't let me off the hook that easy. I thought if I played on the fact that they loved me, then they might not punish me for misbehaving. Not the case. Even though I always knew they loved me, the reality of the consequences stirred my fear.

***Jesus doesn't honor our illusion that suffering is a cause and effect equation.*** But he does honor the vulnerability that our fear opens up in us. "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." There are consequences for your actions, for your sin.

It's not such a bad thing to be honest about the fragility of our lives. We are real flesh and blood people, we suffer and we die. That's a reality and it's not always a comforting one.

***But the good news is that there is power in our weakness.***

If our fear is what makes us count our breaths in the dark, if our fear and our weakness are what help us to see our sin for what it is...our feeble attempt to preserve our social identities, our attempt to control our lives by picking and choosing who our friends will be, even inside these doors, our desire to be powerful and affluent, our attempt to deny the way of the cross and do things our own way, our constant need for more and better, our blindness to those in need around us.

There's power in the weakness of our sin, if we are willing to look ourselves in the mirror and admit that we are sinful, broken creatures. If our fear helps us to see and recognize our sin for what it is, and that realization is what turns us toward the light of Christ, then it's a good thing, because it's that turning, that repentance that Jesus wants for us. He wanted it for the people gathered around him in Luke's Gospel and He wants it for us today.

This Gospel text brings us face to face with the reality of judgment, and the reality of our sin, and this isn't something we like to talk about, but I imagine it's something we think about often.

Martin Luther's understanding of the law, God's judgment, is that it's present in our lives to convict our hearts, open our eyes and drive us to our knees, so that we hear and receive God's words of grace and forgiveness. God's amazing grace is most powerfully experienced in those situations when we least deserve it.

*Then Jesus 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?' The gardener 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.'"*

*Another chance, one more year, an opportunity for growth, for change, for new life.* It wasn't the vineyard owner who offered the dying fig tree another chance, it was the patient gardener who offered to double his own efforts to make the tree fruitful. *What a gift of grace and mercy.*

Here we are on this the third Sunday of Lent, halfway through the Lenten journey of repentance and self-reflection. Some of us might be at the point where those promises to give up complaining, eating meat or talking rudely to our spouse are quickly becoming harder to achieve. We think to ourselves, "Well I'll try again tomorrow or maybe next year. It's just too hard."

In our own human experience, change is hard; changing jobs, losing weight, stopping smoking. *So it's not surprising that repentance as a change of heart is a lifelong task.*

While the stakes are high "Repent or perish!" the parable of the fig tree offers this word of hope: that in our work of repentance God shows us patience (*leave it for this year*) and assists us (*I will spread manure around it and maybe it will grow*).

Jesus' call to repentance is an act of mercy. His patient cultivation of us, like a gardener tending to a dying tree, is a continuous offer of salvation, Jesus' own life given for us. Jesus, our patient gardener, will not abandon us! He will not, like the vineyard owner, give up on us at the first sign of barren limbs. Often times we are so barren, often times we feel less than effective, less than useful, we feel as though we can't get anything right, or nothing is going our way.

But God continues to say to us, his cherished and beloved children, "I have faith in you, another year, some more time to turn around, change the way you're living, don't give up, I know you can do it and I'll be here to help you."

God in Christ Jesus knows and understands our experience of human suffering and although he doesn't give us a way out of our wounds, He does give us a passage through them, and He goes with us, patiently.

As writer and Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor says, God gently tells us, "*Don't worry about all the things that can come crashing down on your head. Terrible things happen and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing, from growing and becoming fruitful.*

*That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you, is a holy place. Look around while you're there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life!*

God struggles with us against every condition that is contrary to our fruitfulness, and He gives us the gift of Christian community to help us turn around, grow and bear fruit.

Here in this place is where we work together to bear fruit. Here is where we are called to challenge one another to live our lives differently than the world expects. Here is where we love unconditionally, where we forgive, where we are reminded that we live because Christ lives and that's good news in the midst of our suffering.

The unique gift of this place, the body of Christ at St. Michael Lutheran Church, is the giving and receiving of forgiveness, the sharing of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ, the power of the life giving water of Baptism, the Word of God spread upon us like manure on a fig tree, all things the world does not offer. They are what make the Church the Church.

The good news is that this is a place where manure *can* become holy stuff, life giving, life changing stuff, if we give it to God. Trusting in Him to be our patient gardener, waiting with us through the sin, through the suffering, through to another year and another chance for life! Thanks be to God!

Amen.