

LUKE 13:1-9

SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2022

TRADITIONAL

THIS PAST WEEK THE NEWS WAS RIFE WITH MURDERS, FATAL CAR ACCIDENTS, A DROWNING, A CHILD'S DEATH BY ABUSE, AND WAR. MANY TIMES THE NEWS WILL GO TO A CLIP OF FAMILY ASKING SOMETHING LIKE "WHY?" "WHY DID THIS HAPPEN?" WHY WOULD GOD ALLOW SOMETHING LIKE THIS?" I DON'T HAVE ANSWERS TO THE "WHY" QUESTION THIS MORNING. BUT IN SIMILAR SITUATIONS, I HAVE ASSURED FAMILIES OF GOD'S LOVE AND CARE. NO, THE ACCIDENT, CRIME OR ABUSE WAS NOT SOME KIND OF DIVINE PUNISHMENT. NO, THEY NEED NOT ADD GUILT TO THEIR ALREADY HEAVY BURDEN OF GRIEF.

BUT IF I TOOK MY CUES FROM JESUS HIMSELF, I MIGHT SAY SOMETHING VERY DIFFERENT. "HEAVENS NO, YOU DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO DESERVE THIS. GOD DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY. BUT LET ME BE HONEST WITH YOU – **UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH.**" DOES THAT SOUND HARSH? UNFEELING? WELL, OUR LORD SAID AS MUCH ONE TIME. MAYBE HE WOULD HAVE FAILED THE PASTORAL CARE CLASS AT SEMINARY, BUT HE SAID IT, NONETHELESS.

IN OUR GOSPEL TEXT, SOME ANXIOUS PEOPLE APPROACH JESUS. THEY'RE CLEARLY DISTURBED, FOR THEY'VE JUST RECEIVED NEWS ABOUT A GROUP OF INNOCENT JEWS WHO WERE SLAUGHTERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE'S REIGN OF TERROR. FAST-FORWARD A COUPLE OF CENTURIES AND THEY MIGHT HAVE ASKED, "HEY JESUS, THOSE PEOPLE WHO LOST THEIR LIVES IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE – WERE THEY WORSE SINNERS THAN ALL THE OTHER FOLKS BECAUSE THEY DIED IN SUCH A HORRIBLE WAY?" I CAN SEE JESUS PAUSE TO SCRATCH HIS BEARD AND THINK. "NO, I TELL YOU, THERE'S NO CONNECTION BETWEEN THE RUSSIAN'S ATTACK AND THEIR BEHAVIOR. BUT LISTEN – **UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH.**"

JESUS PAUSES TO LOOK OUT OVER THE CROWD. HE REMEMBERS AN INCIDENT ABOUT A COLLAPSED TOWER OVER AT THE POOL OF SILOAM. "AND I'M SURE YOU WONDER," HE MIGHT HAVE SAID, "WHAT ABOUT ALL THE PEOPLE WHO DIE IN THOSE HORRIBLE EARTHQUAKES? AND HURRICANES, AND WILD FIRES, AND ACTS OF GOD? WERE THEY WORSE SINNERS THAN THOSE WHO SURVIVED?"

“ABSOLUTELY NOT,” JESUS SAYS. “GET THAT CRAZY IDEA OUT OF YOUR HEADS. BUT I WILL SAY THIS - UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH.” FOR ME, THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST CONFUSING STORIES IN ALL FOUR GOSPELS. I CHEER AS JESUS CONFRONTS THE COMMON NOTION THAT **SIN AND SUFFERING** ARE ALWAYS LINKED IN A CAUSE-AND-EFFECT FASHION. BUT I CRINGE AS HE PREDICTS A SIMILAR DEMISE FOR EVERYONE WHO REFUSES TO CLEAN UP THEIR ACT.

NOTICE THAT THESE STORIES OF SUFFERING COULD HAVE COME RIGHT OUT OF THIS MORNING’S HEADLINES. THE FIRST IS ABOUT CALCULATED EVIL, PLANNED BY WICKED PEOPLE. THE SECOND ADDRESSES UNPLANNED DISASTERS LIKE TORNADOES, HURRICANES, FAMINE, DROUGHT. THEY JUST HAPPEN, AND PEOPLE GET IN THE WAY. AND REPORTERS WILL GIVE US AS MUCH DETAIL AS WE’RE ABLE TO STOMACH. MAYBE THE TOWER OF SILOAM FELL ON THOSE POOR PEOPLE BECAUSE THE LOCAL CONTRACTOR CUT TOO MANY CORNERS. BUT WE AREN’T TOLD THAT. IN THIS SECOND TYPE OF SUFFERING, THERE IS USUALLY NO ONE TO BLAME. AND SO WE CALL THEM ACTS OF GOD.

IN PREPARATION FOR LENT, I READ AN ARTICLE ON FASTING, WHICH REALLY GETS AT THE TRUTH OF TODAY’S LESSON. THE AUTHOR OF THE ESSAY WAS ON DAY SIX OF A WEEKLONG FAST WHEN HE ENTERED THESE THOUGHTS IN HIS JOURNAL:

HE SAYS, “A GUY ACROSS THE AISLE FROM ME ON THE TRAIN TEARS THROUGH A BIG MAC AND TWO BAGS OF FRENCH FRIES AS IF HIS LIFE DEPENDED ON IT. I WATCH HIM SHOVEL GREASY FRIES INTO HIS MOUTH, WHERE A FRAGMENT OF SPECIAL SAUCE GLISTENS ON HIS LIP. I AM REVOLTED. A FEELING OF [SUPERIORITY] COMES OVER ME. COMPARED TO THIS GUY, I AM PURE SPIRITUAL FIRE.”

THE TRUTH IS, IT’S FAR EASIER TO OBSERVE EVIL IN OTHERS THAN IT IS TO CONFESS EVIL IN OURSELVES. WE READ THE NEWSPAPER OR CLICK ON THE EVENING NEWS AND THINK, *“I MAY MAKE MISTAKES. I MAY HURT PEOPLE OCCASIONALLY. BUT HEY, AT LEAST I’M NOT AS BAD AS _____.”* (YOU FILL IN THE BLANK) *I MAY CUT AN ETHICAL CORNER OR TWO, BUT AT LEAST I’M NOT AS BAD AS THOSE THIRD-WORLD DICTATORS OR GREEDY BANK CEO’S OR CORRUPT POLITICIANS.”* THE FOLKS WHO MAKE THE HEADLINES , UNDENIABLY HELP US JUSTIFY OUR OWN BAD BEHAVIOR, BECAUSE *OUR* SINS SEEM SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT BY COMPARISON. BUT WHO’S TO SAY?

BESIDES, JESUS WON’T LET US OFF THE HOOK SO EASILY. EVEN THOUGH YOU AND I ARE ENDLESSLY INTERESTED IN ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF SUFFERING, AND THE

GOD WHO SEEMS TO ALLOW IT, HE TURNS OUR QUESTIONS ABOUT EVIL “OUT THERE” ON THEIR HEADS.

HE WANTS TO KNOW, INSTEAD, ABOUT THE EVIL INSIDE EACH OF US. JESUS REFUSES TO STAY WITH THE HEADLINES. HE TAKES AIM ELSEWHERE – AT OUR OWN HEARTS, AND OUR STANDING BEFORE GOD.

JESUS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWS UP WITH A PARABLE ABOUT A FIG TREE. HE’S MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE FRUIT IN YOUR LIFE THAN HE IS WITH THE LACK OF IT IN OTHERS. JESUS WANTS US TO UNDERSTAND THAT IT’S NOT JUST THE HEADLINES THAT DEFINE THE WORLD’S PROBLEMS. IT’S YOU AND ME! ***FOR THREE YEARS,***” SAYS THE VINEYARD OWNER, ***“I’VE COME LOOKING FOR FRUIT ON THIS TREE, AND STILL FOUND NONE.”***

IT’S TEMPTING TO READ THE MORNING PAPER OR WATCH THE EVENING NEWS AND JUST SHAKE OUR HEADS SADLY. BUT HEAD-SHAKING REALLY DOESN’T CHANGE MUCH, DOES IT? I SUPPOSE JESUS COULD JUST ZAP THE WORLD INTO A STATE OF PEACE AND HARMONY. BUT THAT’S NOT HOW HE CHOOSES TO WORK. HIS REAL POWER IS REVEALED IN REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS, ONE PERSON AT A TIME, ONE FAST AT A TIME, ONE WORSHIP SERVICE AT A TIME AND... WELL, YOU GET THE PICTURE.

IN JESUS’ PARABLE, THE LANDOWNER ORDERS THIS FIG TREE CUT DOWN. BUT THE GARDENER PLEADS FOR IT. AND WHO IS THE GARDENER BUT JESUS HIMSELF? ***“GIVE IT ONE MORE CHANCE,”*** HE BEGS. ***“LET ME NURTURE IT FOR ONE MORE YEAR, AND LET’S SEE WHAT HAPPENS.”*** THAT’S GRACE. WE KNOW WHAT FRUIT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE REQUIRES OF US IN TERMS OF OBEDIENCE AND MORALITY. BUT WE ALSO KNOW HOW FAR SHORT WE FALL. ***“UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH.”*** IT’S NOT A THREAT. IT’S THE SIMPLE TRUTH.

BUT IT’S SO HARD TO ADMIT OUR FAULTS. IF WE WANT TO GET AHEAD IN THIS WORLD AND BE ACCEPTED BY OTHERS, IT’S GENERALLY BETTER TO CONCEAL OUR SHORTCOMINGS AND PUT ON A GOOD FRONT FOR OTHERS. WHO GOES ON A JOB INTERVIEW AND DECLARES, ***“I HAVE TO TELL YOU, I HAVE A HABIT OF MISSING WORK, CRITICIZING MY SUPERVISORS, AND SPREADING OFFICE GOSSIP”***? WHO DOES THAT? WHO GOES ON A FIRST DATE AND SAYS, ***“LISTEN, I SHOULD BE HONEST – I TEND TO MONOPOLIZE CONVERSATION AND BE OVERLY CRITICAL. I’M A PROCRASTINATOR, A TERRIBLE LISTENER, AND I ALWAYS LEAVE MY SOCKS LYING AROUND ON THE FLOOR.”*** WHO DOES THAT? AS A LITTLE GIRL SAID TO HER CLASSMATE

WHO HAD TO SIT IN THE CORNER, *"TO ERR IS HUMAN, BUT TO ADMIT IT IS JUST PLAIN STUPID."*

WELL, JESUS TEACHES OTHERWISE. INSTEAD OF OFFERING SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING FOR OUR TENDENCY TO COVER UP FAULTS AND WRONGDOING, JESUS COMMANDS US TO DISCLOSE THE EVIL WITHIN, AND CONFESS OUR FAILURES. MOST OF US ARE WILLING TO CONFESS OUR SINS AS LONG AS WE DON'T HAVE TO CHANGE. WE'RE WILLING TO ADMIT TO A BLEMISH OR TWO ON OUR MORAL COMPLEXION, BUT NOTHING THAT CAN'T BE MINIMIZED BY COMPARING OURSELVES TO OTHERS OR COVERED UP BY AN OCCASIONAL GOOD DEED.

YET DISCIPLESHIP DEMANDS THAT WE COMPARE OURSELVES TO JESUS. FOR ONLY THEN DO WE GET AN *HONEST* ASSESSMENT OF OUR SPIRITUAL CONDITION. AND HE'S NOT DEMANDING SOMETHING THAT WE CAN'T PRODUCE! IN THE PARABLE, HE DOESN'T ASK THE FIG TREE TO PRODUCE BANANAS. HE DOESN'T ASK THE FIG TREE TO GROW AS TALL AS AN OAK OR TO BE AS FRAGRANT AS A CEDAR. HE'S ONLY ASKING IT TO BE WHAT IT IS – TO DO WHAT IT WAS CREATED TO DO - PRODUCE FIGS!

ONLY WHEN WE ARE FREE FROM SIN DO WE HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO BECOME WHO GOD HAS CREATED US TO BE. REPENTANCE MAKES THAT POSSIBLE. REPENTANCE IS THE ACT OF TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OURSELVES AND OUR ACTIONS BY GIVING OURSELVES TO CHRIST. LENT CALLS US TO BE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN WITH JESUS, AGAIN AND AGAIN. IT'S ABOUT BECOMING DEAD TO SIN AND ALIVE TO HIM, DAY BY DAY, OVER AND OVER. ***"UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH."*** IT'S NOT A THREAT. IT'S THE SIMPLE TRUTH.

SHAKING OUR HEADS AT THE HEADLINES WON'T CHANGE MUCH. LOOKING DEEPLY INTO OUR OWN FICKLE HEARTS AND ALLOWING JESUS FULL ACCESS THERE WILL. ON WEDNESDAY AFTER BOTH WORSHIP SERVICES, THERE WAS AN INVITATION TO COME AND PRIVATELY CONFESS YOUR SIN. TO UNBURDEN YOURSELF, TO REPENT. THE INVITATION STILL STANDS. COME IN AND ASK FOR PRIVATE CONFESSION, AND BE SET FREE FROM ALL THAT HOLDS YOU BOUND. IN JESUS' NAME, AMEN.