

Third Sunday in Lent March 24 2019

Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

They must have done something to deserve it.

When something horrible happens somewhere, we've all at one time or another, had that kind of thought, haven't we? Even if only for a fleeting moment. They must have done something to deserve it.

It's a small example, but I saw something in my newsfeed on Friday that reflects this thinking. A Real Housewives of Atlanta cast member NeNe Leakes wondered if her husband's stage 3 colon cancer wasn't "karma" for his infidelity.

Televangelist Pat Robertson said Hurricane Katrina hitting New Orleans was God's punishing them for their decadent and sinful ways.

This blaming and, when public, shaming instinct has at least two impulses.

The first comes from our own fear about disease, death, injury, and suffering. If we can explain it, find a reason for it, we can control it. It becomes less fearful because I know how to avoid it or at least understand it. The idea that cancer, a car accident, or a death of a loved one can be explained in some way means it is not random. And that thought makes us feel better. Because random is terrifying.

The second impulse comes from our own need to feel morally superior. It is this second impulse that often moves us to blame those who are nothing more than victims. You hear this when folks say, "If she hadn't been wearing such a revealing outfit, she wouldn't have been attacked. What was he doing in that

neighborhood? If he got shot, he must have deserved it.” This makes us feel better because (again) I am safe. Because I’m better than them. Because I don’t do that. I feel better both because I know the causality of it (they sinned!) and I can avoid that by just being my righteous self.

To paraphrase Jesus using the words of Professor Nate Frambach at Wartburg Seminary. This is “stinkin’ thinkin’” and we’d should knock it off.

More specifically, when the crowd shares with Jesus about the Galileans who were killed in Jerusalem by Pilate as they offered their sacrifices, Jesus responds to the assumptions behind their words. “Are you supposing that these Galileans suffered because they were worse sinners than everyone else? That they deserved or earned what they got because of that?” and later “Are you supposing those killed by the falling tower in Jerusalem were worse in some way than everyone else living there? That they deserved or earned what they got because of that?”

“Not at all!”, Jesus says, “Repent, because you’re going to be just as dead as them.”

Often we hear this word “repent” and we think of saying “I’m sorry”. We think about morality, our behavior, especially in refraining from something. But it is a much broader and harder thing in Luke. Here it literally means to change your mind. To re-orient yourself towards God and engage in Kingdom thinking.

What is this change in thinking here? Primarily, it is one that moves from focusing on others and how awful they are, to focusing on ourselves. Don’t worry about others and what they did or did not do wrong. Worry about yourself.

Now, you may be thinking, “Pastor, this seems to be contrary to our theme on growing in love for one another. Agape- that other centered love. Aren’t we supposed to think more about others than ourselves?”

Yes, in general that is true, when it comes to care for the other. But when it comes to attacking others, feeling self-righteous and superior, then we need to look to ourselves first. Especially when we seek to blame.

I took a community workshop on restoring civility in our public discourse. The presenter at the beginning of the workshop said, “Raise your hand if you think we need more civility in our public discourse.” Everyone there did so. And I’m sure they, like me, had all kinds of thoughts about what everyone else had to do to make our public conversations were more civil. They could list all the people who had brought this scourge upon our politics and could quote their misdeeds chapter and verse.

Then, the presenter told us the truth. “You know how you make our public conversation more civil? Practice even greater civility yourself.”

It was a truth that hurt. One that prompted me and based on the feedback, most of the group to think...now wait a minute! I’m pretty dog-gone civil. It’s those other bozos who need help! Hmmm. Point taken.

He then walked through the variety of ways in which we could indeed grow in our skills in engaging our fellow citizens, even those we disagree with, in a more respectful manner. One that truly listened to what they had to say. That engaged them in conversation around ideas; not engaged in ad hominem attacks on their looks or labeling them so that you didn’t have to look at those ideas.

You want greater civility? All you can control is yourself and your little area of the world. And even that is hard enough.

Jesus does the same thing in this text, he short circuits the crowds self-righteous ponderings and draws them back to reality. Folks, if death feeds on sin, then it's coming for you, too. So repent, change your thinking.

That change in thinking continues in the parable of the fig tree in the vineyard.

In the world, if something doesn't work, doesn't do what is necessary, doesn't bear fruit, it get's thrown away. Right? We're all about productivity. This is one of those leading economic indicators. We are measured by it at work and at school. We are measured by it (if less directly) in our community- if you aren't perpetually busy then you must be lazy! Productivity is where we tend to derive our meaning. And if you don't measure up, you get tossed aside as worthless.

The vineyard owner is thinking this way, isn't he? The fig tree has been there for three years. Its purpose partially, is to provide a trellis for the grape vines to grow on. There are some ancient manuals that suggest grapes grown on a fig tree produce better wine (marketing!). But, fig trees also suck up a lot of nutrients and their extensive root system can compete with the grape vines. He's looking at this tree that hasn't produced any fruit for three years and he's done.

"I've been patient enough. Cut it down", he tells the vinedresser. All he sees is something not doing what it is supposed to. Not putting in the "effort" so to speak. But here again we have an example of "stinkin' thinkin'".

Instead of cutting it down, the vinedresser says, "Let me care for and feed it. Let me figure out why it isn't producing, attend to that, and then you can come back

in a year and decide what to do.” He engages in Kingdom thinking. Seeing not something that is worthless, but something that needs to be attended to, investigated, listened to.

Kingdom thinking doesn’t just toss people aside, but rather attends to them. Why are they not able to concentrate? What’s behind their anger? How can I help give them what they need to grow? To have a chance to become the person God created them to be?

This attention to the least of these is not only Kingdom thinking, it is divine thinking. It is this thinking that saves us. Because God in Jesus Christ shows us that God does the same for us. That God does not give up on us, no matter how much we sin. How much we hurt one another. How much we ignore God.

This is what saves us! That we do not have to think about the things the world does. The wages of sin is death, and I will die. You will die. But because God has claimed us, through the waters of baptism has raised us to new life, we don’t have to worry about that stuff anymore. Because God has our back. We don’t have to explain why suffering happens, or understand it, or try to control it.

Instead, we are freed from all those fears, to repent. To change our thinking, to re-orient ourselves towards God. To see clearly our own shortcomings and own them. “Yup, that’s me...and with God’s help I’m working on it.”

We are freed, to look at people differently. To attend to them when they do not bear fruit. To ask why? Why don’t you grow? What has happened that you strike out? To see what we may do, through the power of the Holy Spirit to feed them, so that they might produce fruit.

Isn't that the kind of world we want to live in? One where we can be honest about our own short-comings. One where we don't blame the victims but help them. One where everyone is attended to and given every opportunity to be who God has created them to be?

Then let us cry out to God for help. That we might repent, might change our thinking. Let us make use of the tools God has given us to loosen the soil around us, receive the nutrients we need to grow; this Meal of Bread and Wine, conversation with God in prayer, encounter with God's Word in regular reading of scripture, joy and growth in fellowship with other believers. Let us do all these things, trusting in the love and mercy of God as shown to us by Jesus Christ, who leads us into this life of Kingdom thinking. Thanks be to God!