

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
February 28, 2016  
Third Sunday in Lent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 103:1-11  
I Corinthians 10:1-13  
Luke 13:1-9

Our Gospel lesson from Luke today is captivating, in that it is a story that occurs only in Luke and not in the other Gospels. The text introduces us to two groups of people who tragically died, and then just as quickly removes the spotlight, leaving us wondering what in the world happened.

We don't know what happened for sure, but we do know a little about what is on the hearts and minds of Jesus' hearers in this text. They have a burning question in their hearts. What they want to know is: *Is suffering connected to our behavior?* More precisely, they want to know if there is *a direct correlation between suffering and sin.*

We moderns share their questions. We wonder if suffering is connected to our behavior. We wonder if suffering and calamity is a form of punishment.

Those listening to Jesus thought so. They took it for granted that the Galileans who were brutally murdered at the hands of Pontius Pilate and those who died at the collapse of the tower of Siloam committed a terrible sin which made them deserving of their deaths.

This should not be too shocking, since in antiquity it was common to believe

that if you became seriously ill or suffered a tragic accident, it was because you had sinned and made God angry.

The logic can be twisted, but it can have a strong grip, even on us. We look around and see tragedy befall others, and we secretly wonder -- if only for a minute -- if they might have had it coming. We experience a setback or a tragedy in our own lives, and we pause -- if only briefly -- to consider what we might have done to anger the Almighty.

Through the use of two actual events and a short parable, Jesus speaks to this issue. And from what he says, we can conclude with some amount of confidence that *suffering is NOT a form of punishment*.

Jesus' rather pointed response says as much: "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than other people from Galilee? Is that why they suffered?"

Then just to be sure they get the point, Jesus continues: "And what about the 18 men who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem?"

Apparently, our formulas are *not* as watertight as we think, especially when it comes to God's justice. Suffering and tragedy are not always God's payback for sin. And the fact that things may be well with us is not necessarily a sign of God's pleasure, either!

But here is an important caveat: *Just because suffering is NOT punishment*

*does not mean that it is disconnected entirely from sin.* Pilate's murderous acts of terror were sinful. The murderous and violent actions that are part of the daily news cycle are sinful. Sin has consequences. There are all kinds of bad behaviors that contribute to much of the misery in the world. And to the extent that we can confront the sin in ourselves and others, the less misery there will be. This is part of what I think Jesus means when he says here, "Unless all of you repent, you likewise will perish."

But the bottom line still remains: **God does not cause suffering, calamity, or tragedy. Nor does God delight in them.**

It was the short parable Jesus tells here that led me more strongly to this conclusion this week. A Landowner plants a fig tree in his garden and is frustrated when it does not produce fruit. So he says to his gardener: "I've waited a long time and I'm tired of waiting. This unproductive fig tree needs to go. Cut it down."

The traditional and familiar approach to this story has been that we view God as the Landowner, and Jesus as the gardener. The fig tree might represent Israel, or Israel's religious leaders, or perhaps all of those who do not respond to God's loving overtures in their lives.

But reading the story through this lens creates a problem, because it creates a picture of God that doesn't seem to fit the rest of Luke's Gospel. If God is the

Landowner in the story, the picture of God that emerges is a God who is angry and who needs to be placated. God is angry at *sin*, and needs to punish *sinner*s.

But how does Luke typically portray God? You already know the answer. Luke portrays God as a Father, *whose heart is broken* and who scans the distant horizon day after day after day, waiting for his wayward son to come home.

Luke portrays God as a woman who rummages through her house, sweeping and cleaning all night looking for a lost coin. And when she finds it, she throws a party that costs more than the coin is worth -- just to celebrate!

Luke's Gospel overflows with the conviction that "there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

Once I saw this again, I knew I had to take a second look at this short parable. Given Luke's description of how God reacts to sin, I had to ask myself a hard question: *What if the Landowner in the story represents my own sense of how the world should work?* That is, from as far back as I can remember, I have wanted life to be "fair." And *fairness* for me has meant being rewarded for doing good and being punished for doing wrong. (Actually, to be honest: I want God to be fair and just in punishing others when they do wrong, and *merciful* to me when I do wrong.)

So here is the question: What if the gardener in this story is not Jesus, but

*God?* What if God is the one consistently raising a voice to say that the ultimate answer to sin isn't *punishment*, but rather *mercy*?

I know this may be shocking to some. Our customary way of seeing Jesus' death on the Cross goes something like this: Because God is just, God has to punish sin. And because God is loving, God beats up on Jesus instead of us.

But I had to ask myself this week whether this understanding of the Cross says more about my inadequate understanding of justice than it says about God. What if the Cross is not about *punishment*, but *mercy*? What if God's response to sin is not *punishment* (even in the name of justice), but *sacrificial love*?

Note where this story takes place in Luke's narrative. The discussion takes place on the road to Jerusalem as Jesus is making his way to the Cross. God's answer to sin is not punishment, but *love*. In the Cross, we see just how far God is willing to go to be *with* us and *for* us, even to the point of suffering unjustly and dying the death of a criminal. And in the resurrection, we see that God's love is stronger than anything – even death.

If this sounds strange or hard to accept, let me assure you that I'm not just spouting my own hair brained opinion. John Wesley taught and believed that we will never be able to love God fully until we become fully convinced of God's love for us. And for Wesley, it is *the Cross* where God most convincingly show us His great love for us. It was as if God took those drops of blood that fell from Jesus'

mangled body and finger painted a message on the canvas of the sky that said: “I love you!”

The greatest hymnody of the church speaks this message, and it transcends religious traditions. Pope Francis declared 2016 as the “Year of Mercy,” and when Roman Catholics gather for worship during this year, they recite these words:

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
You have taught us to be merciful like the Heavenly Father,  
And have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.  
Show us your face and we will be saved.  
Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew  
From being enslaved by money;  
The adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things;  
Made Peter weep after his betrayal,  
And assured paradise to the repentant thief.  
Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us,  
The words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:  
“If you knew the gift of God!”*

*You are the visible face of the invisible Father,  
Of the God who manifests his power above all  
By forgiveness and mercy:  
Let the Church be your visible face in the world,  
Its Lord risen and glorified.*

(Prayer for the Year of Mercy, Pontifical Council for the Promotion of New Evangelization)

As you go forth from this place today, chances are that you will encounter people in your life who are suffering, or who have experienced tragedy. Often, it is hard to know what to say, and how to respond.

But where possible, help people to see that in the face of their suffering and

loss and tragedy that God is *with them, not against them*. Help them to see that God understands, and has promised to redeem all things, even suffering and loss. Help them to see that God will keep waiting for us and keep urging us to turn away from our self-destructive ways to be drawn into the embrace of His love.

This is the Gospel of the Lord, and is truly Good News.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.