

Self-Reflection and Renewal

Isaiah 55:6-13 Luke 13:1-9

The passages from Luke that are presented to us from Luke 9 through 19 are teachings and events from Jesus' and the disciples' journey to Jerusalem, through Samaritan country. Samaritan country could be viewed as a metaphor for the challenging aspects of our journey, enemy territory (as it was for them), or places of discomfort along the way in each of our journeys, or our collective journey. And Luke has written his gospel in such a way that this journey is depicted as journey of discovery and self-reflection. And this morning's text is a good example of that.

Luke 13:1-9

13 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

⁶ 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. ⁷So 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?" ⁸He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Jesus uses a little preacher's hyperbole here—this is prophetic

speech again that functions like an alarm clock to startle people awake in their faith and self-awareness)

This is the word of the Lord!

At a conflict-management training/workshop that I attended several years ago the facilitator said this to us: “If you want to cause conflict, or escalate conflict, start your sentences with the word “You...” And point your finger at someone for good measure.” And he reminded us of the old adage, when you point your finger at someone, only one is pointed toward the other, but three are pointed back!

There are indeed times when we are tempted to point the proverbial finger at someone (maybe more with our mind than with our actual hand) and say, “It’s their fault.” Or, “They had it coming.” “They must have done something to deserve it.” All the while being unaware that I’m pointing three fingers back at myself.

And that’s Jesus’ point (pun intended) in his words to us from Luke 13 this morning: finger pointing and spending our days coming up with graduated systems by which to rate guilt or sinfulness *in other people* isn’t helpful to anyone. In the big picture of things, Jesus says, all of us need to repent (“self-reflect” is another way to put it). And repentance is not apparently graded on the curve. One person does not need to present a mouse-size portion of repentance

whereas another needs to generate an elephant-size portion: repentance is repentance. It's all the same, as is divine grace and mercy, as presented in the parable of the fig tree.

Let's back up for a moment. Let's remember that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. And Jesus is leading a group of disciples, many of whom are from Galilee. That's where Jesus called his first disciples, at the Sea of Galilee, and that's where large crowds began to collect and follow him. And as they're on their way to Jerusalem, a concern is expressed to Jesus about some *Galileans* who made a similar journey to Jerusalem for a festival, at which time Pontius Pilate decided to make a show of force and commit atrocities in the temple during the time of their sacrificial offering. I won't even mention the details of what occurred; we have enough disturbing and traumatic news and images these days. Just know that it was horrific. Involving animal blood mixed with human blood.

And btw, this mention of Pontius Pilate in Luke 13 is the only place outside of Holy Week where he is mentioned in the gospels, and it gives us a glimpse of what kind of person and leader he really was.

Because during Holy Week, when Jesus is on trial, we get a picture of Pilate as a wishy-washy, curious governor who indeed wielded a lot of power, but in an uncertain and self-serving sort of way. And when Jesus is brought to him, he

seems like he wants to do the right thing and release Jesus; he doesn't seem that evil. However, what we learn from this brief account this morning, and from the historical writings of the time, is that Pontius Pilate administered atrocity regularly to keep the public in line. The Romans did that a lot—show 'em who's boss. It was one way to keep the peace; which, as we know, is not really peace.

The people who share the news of this atrocity are not just bringing information to Jesus. Two questions linger in the air as they tell this news: 1. Does Jesus really intend to continue his journey to Jerusalem? Is he aware of what might await him, and the fellow Galileans, at the hands of a madman? There is a measure of fear behind this question. With legitimate reason. I mean, if I booked travel to go somewhere and found out that the local governor in my destination city had a thing for killing Presbyterian clergy, I'd probably change my itinerary. 2. More at play, though, is the second question: was this atrocity at the hands of Pontius Pilate a sign that the Galileans were being punished for something? What did they do to deserve such a fate?

While the first question is understandably on their minds, this second question is more at play because the prevailing mindset and theology in Judaism at that time was that if someone suffered in some way, it meant that God was punishing them for sin. They must have done something wrong. So, perhaps,

they deserved their fate. Jesus addresses this, and adds to their news of *human-made* disaster an example of a *natural* disaster, or an accident, that also caused suffering and death, and asks if they think sin was also the cause of *that*. “Were they worse sinners, that the building collapsed on them?” As if God were the “Punisher in Chief” for graduated levels of offenses, which required graduated levels of repentance, or consequences.

We hear the same theology at play when some tv preachers today declare that a terrorist attack, or a hurricane, or other natural disaster is God’s punishment on people for tolerating what they believe is immoral behavior. Heidi saw this play out at Children’s Hospital when young parents whose child is sick wonder, “What did my baby do to deserve this? What did *we* do to deserve this?” As if God is punishing them or their child for some reason.

But this was the prevailing theology of the day. We see that thinking reflected in John 9 when the disciples encounter a blind man, and they ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” As if those are the only two options which explain why he was blind. Either *he* did something, or the sins *of the parents* have been visited upon their child.

And in response to that question, Jesus replies that his blindness is not a result of his or his parents’ sin. That’s wrong thinking, he says. There is no cause

and effect—that is, where sin leads to suffering as punishment from God. Some sin leads to suffering for sure; there are consequences to a person's actions in some cases. The wrong thinking, Jesus points out, is when a person believes that suffering is caused by God as a punishment for sin.

And in our text this morning, Jesus likewise and vehemently rebuffs the prevailing theology of the day that suffering is God's punishment for sin. God doesn't work that way. Natural disasters are part of the earth's "natural" way of being; accidental disasters happen, unfortunately; political turmoil and even violence are as old as humanity, unfortunately. Because of free will. That doesn't excuse the human turmoil and violence or simply explain it away—we can, and must, do better! The point is, God isn't punishing people through it. *People* are punishing people! Because of selfishness or really bad religion.

Well, in response to the delivery of the news about what Pilate did, Jesus did what Jesus does, and he takes the opportunity to drop some insight into a teachable moment.

Let us notice to begin with that Jesus does not get wrapped up in what Pontius Pilate did, as horrible as it was. He doesn't condemn him or get sucked into a debate about politics or get caught up in a conversation about revolt against the Romans (which is what some people wanted; some commentators

wonder if the people who brought this news to Jesus wanted to stir him up so he would fuel the simmering desires for revolt). Jesus doesn't go there.

Instead, surprisingly, he addresses the theological & spiritual issue, and turns attention back on the inquirers and in effect says that if God was in the business of dispensing judgment in relation to sins, there probably would not be anyone left on the planet.

Jesus speaks of the responsibility, then, of everyone who hears: to take the opportunity to reflect on our *own* need to take steps toward God and live a renewed life. We are not to try to explain why someone else is suffering or try to connect their suffering and their struggles to something they must have done wrong to deserve the bad things that are happening in their life. Job's friends did that as an attempt to explain his suffering and they came out sounding like fools, and they were proved wrong in the end.

Jesus uses the word repent here to call each person to *self*-awareness when it comes to needing change in their life, and the word "repent" often conjures up images of preachers wagging their finger, and people being told what miserable sinners they are. But the word repent literally means to change your mind about something. And then, with new information and new vision and understanding, to take action and change your life accordingly.

Sometimes it's a big R Repentance that's needed, when a complete about-face is required—a course correction in life. But all of us are presented with opportunities for small “r” repentances throughout our lives as we learn more about God, and more about ourselves. As more comes to light, about God and about ourselves, we make changes and corrections and we grow and bear fruit (in keeping with the parable about the fig tree). Those are the little “r” repentances that happen all through life, when we are paying attention.

So, the invitation here is to reflect on the opportunities we have, given the time that we have, to walk in goodness and newness of life and pay attention to our *own need* for growth and renewal. To pay attention to *our own* frailties and faults, and *our own* need for God's grace.

In a Bible study I had with high school students in Luke's gospel many years ago, we read this section from Luke and one of the students had the proverbial light bulb go off, and she summarized Jesus' words this way: “Jesus is telling everyone to mind their own business.” I love it when kids put fresh eyes on the biblical text!

There are many ways to say this: “Keep your own side of the street clean.” “Stay in your lane.” Perhaps you have your own way of saying this.

This teaching is akin to Jesus' hyperbolic and comical illustration of taking the log out of our own eye before we offer to remove the speck in someone else's. Or when a group of men want to throw stones at a woman they are accusing as guilty of sin, and Jesus says, "Let any of you who are without sin throw the first stone." These are all Jesus' way of saying, just don't go there.

Because, we're all in need of grace. According to Jesus, none of us are less sinners, or worse sinners; and none of us are sinners emeritus—we may have retired from our work, but not from needing grace, and help in growing up.

I think of Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, when he declared a National Day of Repentance, and confession; a time for everyone to humble themselves. This wasn't a call for just the confederate states to confess and humble themselves. The resolution stated that *everyone* needed to humble themselves and confess.

And to give credit where credit is due, while this call to prayer has been attributed to Abraham Lincoln—naturally, because he was president—it was actually brought forth by Senator James Harlan of Iowa, who introduced the resolution to the Senate in 1863, which asked the President to declare a "*national day of prayer and humiliation*," as it was called, which Lincoln, of course, was willing to do.

I can't imagine Abraham Lincoln, if he were alive today, getting on Twitter and condemning his political opponents. During his leadership he was actually trying to win them over, in spite of the rancor and insults *he* endured. In fact, he was criticized at one point for not condemning his enemies and destroying them, to which he famously replied, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" Back to our passage from Luke...

As a follow-up to this conversation about evil leaders and accidental disasters, and the call to personal reflection and humility, Jesus, again, does what Jesus does, and tells a parable about mercy and grace, lest anyone feel overwhelmed or afraid by what he just said regarding repentance. As happened in another place when Jesus gives them a hard teaching about the Kingdom of heaven, the disciples ask, "Who, then, can be saved?" And although *that* question isn't asked here, it lingers after this conversation about the call to humility and self-reflection. So in response to that, Jesus tells a little parable.

It's a good news parable that says: our God is a God second chances, and third chances, and more chances. God is patient and provides an opportunity and an environment for change and growth and fruitfulness—that's the lesson of the fig tree. God is not short-tempered, losing patience quickly. The Christ figure in

the parable says “Let it be! And I’ll dig around the tree, fertilize it, and see if it bears fruit.”

And although the gardener says “give it *one* more year,” that is not to be taken literally—as if *people* only have one year to get their act together, or else. *Jesus is telling a story.* And of course, to be true to real life, someone who is expecting fruit would want it to bear fruit next year after the proper attention is given to it. But this is just good storytelling. The main point of the parable is that the tree has an advocate (the Master Gardener); and patient and careful attention will be given; and the tree will be provided what it needs to bear fruit.

In the Greek text of Luke 13:8 when the gardener petitions the vineyard owner to “let it alone,” that phrase in Greek is one word, *aphes*, which is also the root word from which we get the word “forgive” and is identical to Jesus’ word in the Lord’s Prayer; “forgive (*aphes*) our debts.” So, it may not be wrong to see the gardener’s words in Luke 13:8 as meaning, not just “leave it alone” in the sense of letting the tree be and not cutting it down, but as meaning also “forgive it” for its fruitlessness. And let me nurture it and try to stimulate its growth so it can bear fruit as it’s made to.

There is similar ecological, agricultural, and forgiveness language in the Isaiah reading you heard: rain and nurture and growth, and the repetition of the word “instead”—instead of thorns and briers are magnificent trees that flourish.

I’ll end with a little story about Mother Teresa. I sometimes hesitate to use her as an example, or quote her, because I’m worried that people will think, “She’s a saint! We can’t be like Mother Teresa. Who could live up to that?” To which, I know, Mother Teresa has said, “Of course you can. I live a simple life, I don’t do great things, but small things with great love, which anyone can do.”

With that in mind here is a short reflection from someone who visited Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta and spent some time there watching what *they* do. Not just Mother Teresa, but all of them. Here is what he wrote:

“The sisters don’t waste time fixing, controlling, or even needing to understand what was wrong with other people. Instead, they put all of their time and energy into letting God change *them*. From that transformed place, they serve and carry the pain of the world, which they are convinced is the pain of God.

I do not believe that the lifestyle of the Missionaries of Charity answers all questions or that they are holier than other Christians I have met. Yet there is a

radical and utterly clear gift of God that is revealed through them. I even dared to ask one of the leaders about one of the most common criticisms of Mother

Teresa: “Why did Mother not speak out against social injustice? Why did she not point out the evil systems and evil people that are chewing up the poor?”

The answer was calm, immediate, and firsthand. Mother Teresa felt that if she took sides, or played the firebrand, that she could not be what Jesus had told her to be—*love to and for all*. She said that if she started correcting and pointing out “sinners” she could no longer be an instrument of love and reconciliation for them. Like her patron Thérèse of Lisieux, “her vocation in the church was to *be love*.” She knew that her primary message had to be *her life itself*.”

That last line resonates with me: her primary message had to be her life itself. That’s a freeing statement, to me. We don’t have to have eloquent words, or convincing arguments, or attempts at trying to change other people. We let ourselves be changed, and let our lives do the talking. Not perfect, but graced by God.

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing