

“Occasions for Repentance” 2-28-29 CHC

We all have beliefs of how God works in our lives and world. Some years ago the Reverend Jerry Falwell, after the September 11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, exculpated, gave a pass of blame, to the suicide-murderers, asserting that their acts were a divine punishment of the United States. The attackers were simply God’s instruments of judgment against a morally corrupt society.

Our text from Luke this morning reveals a similar cause and effect belief as to how God works when bad things happen to people. Some people, present in the crowd with Jesus, tell him about some Galileans whom Pilate slaughters at the altar while they are offering their sacrifices. We don’t know if these are people in the crowd baiting Jesus to make a comment against Rome or trying to arouse Jewish patriotism and set Jesus up to lead a revolt against Rome. Perhaps they are just reporting an event that happened. We can only speculate.

Jewish belief at that time is not dissimilar to Falwell’s views and the belief of some other Christians in our own day. Calamity, when bad things happen to people, is a result of the wages of the sin of people. Like Karma, one’s actions come back on them in this life and the next, a belief also held in Buddhism and Hinduism. In contrast, Jesus makes the point in the Sermon on the Mount that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

Jesus challenges our theology of retribution. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did”. He doesn’t stop there. He goes on; “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell upon them---do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did”.

What do we glean from Jesus’ response? We are at the end of a discourse since Luke 12 where Jesus is teaching about impending judgment and repentance. He is determining the direction of the conversation and will not allow it to become a theological debate about divine justice. What concerns Jesus is the state of our souls and the manner in which we conduct our lives. He reiterates twice the phrase, “Unless you repent”. As those people who died, we all will die. What is important is how we are living now in light of God’s revelation through Christ.

We make light of repentance. Thomas Ybarra observes that Christians are people who feel repentant on Sunday for what they did on Saturday and going to do on Monday. I am inclined to believe that this is what is in the back of Jesus’ mind as he tells the parable of the barren fig tree. Our lives are designed to be lived with integrity. Repentance is the way we deal with the dissonance between where we are and where we ought to be.

Novelist and poet Ron Rash says that he is fascinated by the duality of human beings for evil, but also for goodness. An observer of human nature and culture he writes, “Evil always rises up. And yet there are always people who fight against it. I am fascinated by the war between what is best in our natures and what is worst” (Homiletics, January-February, 2016, p.52).

Life is always presenting occasions for repentance. Isaiah addresses a people who are distracted with their own business and busyness, pursuant of the things of life yet finding them less than satisfying. It is possible that what we spend our lives pursuing in the end may leave us feeling empty. Pastor Emily Heath teaches her youth to never give the best of yourself to someone or something that can never love you back. I have had people tell me that they find no meaning in their work. Money is in the bank but the energy for living creatively is gone. Could this be what happens to us when God is no longer our source of affection and wisdom? So the Lord asks us through the prophet, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Indeed, the temporal things we pursue as ultimate cannot love us back (The Christian Century, February 17th, 2016, p.18).

The powerful gods of our culture lure us into traps that become difficult to climb out of. All around us we watch what money, success, popularity, power, and the effort to build security on earth does to people for whom these pursuits become ends. Can these things love us back?

Journalist Brigid Schulte shares a shocking fact: “The average high school kid today experiences the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient of the 1950’s. What’s more, stress in children can alter not only their neurological and hormonal systems but also their very DNA” (The Christian Century, February 17th, 2016, p.18).

Our culture is making our kids sick and actively rewiring them not for the better. We have smartphones and advanced placement along with conspicuous consumption, but are we being wise? What do you think we are trying to accomplish from the frenetic activity of our lives? We tell ourselves that we will get around to the things of God if there is time, but do we really? Are we spending our time and money and our labor for what does not satisfy?

Lent is a call to turn away from things that can never love us back or satisfy our deepest desires and needs. Why do we allow ourselves to become overwhelmed and overextend ourselves by what we believe to be so urgent and important? I am often suspicious that we are writing the wrong narrative for our lives.

The times of spiritual dryness in my life come when I allow the details, meetings, and day to day organizational demands to push away space for engagement with the Spirit of God. I am fully aware that I can succeed at the temporal demands while at the same time lose my soul. It may come when evil appears to have the upper hand and I’m tempted to be drawn into the darkness and lose sight of hope. Staying connected with God is a discipline, requiring self-awareness and a willingness to create that space for scripture reading, meditation, and prayer. There we can rest in the eye of life’s storms, and receive the gift of Christ’s peace.

And so Jesus tells us a parable about a fig tree. Often a symbol of Israel, Jesus is making reference to the responsibility of the nation to bear fruit and the consequences of not doing so. However, the application is to us as well. Are we creating that space for God in our lives so that we may reflect the love and grace of Christ? Are the things we are doing uplifting the people around us, creating more just conditions, and inclusive of all people? Are we as a church community willing to face our discomfort at the change overwhelming us and prayerfully find ways that we can live and work with our new neighbors even

though we are different cultures? What narrative are we willing to write as we go forward, perhaps becoming the minority culture as we already witness in CYF? What does it look like for us to bear the fruit of Christ's Spirit?

Isaiah draws a picture of a vision of prosperity and the abundant life. There is an invitation to recognize one's thirst and poverty and come to be fed without cost. God offers a banquet to those who are responsive to God's voice. "Incline your ear, and come to me, that your soul may live....Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near...let a person return to the Lord, that God may have mercy for God will abundantly pardon". God is always creating occasions for us to make space for repentance so that God may be present in our lives.

There is deep love and compassion in that offer. The invitation is to drop self-interest as our main pursuit in life and allow the interests of God to shape our plans and choices. My greatest challenges have always been to drop my own personal pursuits and interests and to avoid the temptation to find ways to ease personal discomfort. God offers us an alternative reality and doesn't want us to miss it. But there has to be a movement God-ward on our part to allow for God's full response. Jesus is telling us that we can miss it if we remain stubborn and stuck in our ways.

"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? He (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'". As the gardener, God extends grace and time to all of us.

Isaiah beats the drum of God's living invitation, "Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live".

We are either moving towards love or away from it. We live in a day when the hateful acts of terrorism create fear challenging our moral and spiritual compass. Our hearts can be easily compromised. But as the spiritual and moral leadership displayed after the senseless shooting at the Emmanuel African Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. reminds us, we possess the capacity to fight fear with faith and witness to the power of love overcoming hate.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts".

I like the words of E. Ethelbert Miller: "It's easy for one to embrace the darkness of shadows, to fail to see the bright radiance of hope. Yet what defines our humanity is our capacity to love....A new world is only possible if people are capable of discarding selfishness and accepting the nakedness of the open soul---hence the opportunity to be reborn with the acceptance of the Holy Spirit" (Sojourners, March, 2016, pp. 27-8).

Take advantage of those occasions for repentance. God is waiting.

