

Another Opportunity  
May 25, 2014  
Luke 13:1-9

This morning's reading comes from the thirteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. It includes two stories. The first is the story of tragedy. The second is a parable about a tree. We will soon learn that these stories are more closely linked than a casual reading suggests.

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "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. Or 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

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. So 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?"

He 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.' "

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Merciful God of yet another opportunity, help us to hear your message in a fresh, challenging and new way. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I can assure you that the saying "everything is bigger in Texas" is true when it comes to Christianity. A *Christianity Today* cover story that concluded, "Dallas . . . has more megachurches, megaseminaries, and mega-Christian activity than any other American city."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gilbreath. "The New Capital of Evangelicalism." *Christianity Today*.  
<<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/may21/1.38.html>>

Travel back with me to my world in the 1990s. I was living in Arlington, Texas – just outside of Dallas and Fort Worth. The area was very much as Christian as I am making it sound, perhaps even more. I dare not try to count the number of times complete strangers asked me if I knew Jesus. I was a young seminarian who lived in this bubble – a place where nearly everyone went to church and the few who didn't attend church respected churches as sacred spaces.

My assumptions about the religious world as I knew it were shaken on September 15, 1999. Just down the road in Fort Worth - at Wedgewood Baptist Church - teenagers gathered for a Wednesday evening prayer rally. An uninvited 47-year-old armed man entered their assembly and opened fire. He killed 7 people and wounded 7 more before taking his own life.<sup>2</sup>

This tragedy hit too close to home for many reasons. Not only was I familiar with the church, but I also knew it was home to many seminarians. The first person shot that evening was a seminary student.<sup>3</sup>

How could anyone intentionally seek to do harm to people while they were gathered for worship? Surely the killing of anyone – much less teenagers – as they worship was a story I would hear only once in my lifetime. Sadly, it wasn't.

Shootings at houses of worship in our country have become so common that many experts now suggest churches prepare in advance for the possibility of an active shooter situation. Last year our government released its first ever "Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship."<sup>4</sup> I have even had conversations about this guide with leaders of multiple congregations here in Southwest Florida.

Churches are supposed to be places where religious people feel safe. But, honestly, bad things happen to good people for seemingly no real reason all the time.

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<sup>2</sup> Wedgewood Baptist Church. "Wedgewood Shooting."

<<http://www.wedgewoodbc.org/joyful-relationships/church-information/wedgewood-shooting/>>

<sup>3</sup> David Van Biema. "Terror in the Sanctuary." *TIME*.

<<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,31191,00.html>>

<sup>4</sup> See my blog post on the release of the guide –

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/06/28/churches-active-shooter/>>

Those in the insurance business like to label such events “acts of God.” Here in Southwest Florida we know all too well the reality of hurricanes. Others immediately think of earthquakes or tornadoes or wildfires or whatever is most worrisome given their geography.

Returning to Luke’s Gospel we are met first by a story that stirs up within us the same kinds of uneasiness we feel when we think about church shootings or deaths caused by an act of God. Jeremy Troxler, a United Methodist Minister, tells Luke’s story in a way our twenty-first century ears can hear:

A group of people tells Jesus the news: “Jesus, did you hear? A group of Galileans, people from Galilee, were at worship, they were making their sacrificial offerings to God, when suddenly a squad of soldiers from that tyrant Governor Pilate showed up and slaughtered them right then and there . . . Just terrible! Murdered them in church!”

Then one among the crowd must have wondered aloud what the Galileans had done to deserve such a thing – and that’s the comment that sets Jesus off.

Jesus basically says, “Deserve? Do you really think that those Galileans were worse sinners than any other Galileans, and that that is why this happened to them? Because God was somehow punishing them- because they deserved this? Or do you really think that when that building, that tower crashed down and crushed all those people beneath the rubble not too long ago – you know, the tower at Siloam- do you really think that those poor people deserved that any more than anyone else in Jerusalem?”<sup>5</sup>

Historically speaking, this was a time when most who believed in God thought God was involved in everything. Many also assumed that there was a direct correlation therefore between living well, and being rewarded for making proper lifestyle choices. In other words, when bad things happened it just meant that people were getting what they deserved. These were moments when the divine intervened to settle accounts.

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<sup>5</sup> Duke Chapel. “Sunday Service - 3/7/10 - Jeremy Troxler.” <[http://youtu.be/97SZ30\\_Xv40](http://youtu.be/97SZ30_Xv40)>

Few of us think that way today, but most of us still struggle to make meaning of tragedies. If you are anything like most of the followers of the Way of Jesus I have discussed this challenging topic with, then I suspect there have been times when you have asked some of the most difficult questions of all:

- Is it even possible to be shielded from the unthinkable?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- How could a loving God allow a tragedy like this to happen?

Nancy Rockwell, a United Church of Christ minister, suggests that it is times like these that we can become tempted to give up on God. When we are overcome by a tragic situation and have no suitable answers it seems easier just to walk away from it all. At the very least we want real answers – satisfying answers – to our questions. Questions that include

- What is the point of the church, if the church insists only on serving itself?
- What is the value of the nation, if the flag is wrapped around corruption and torture?
- What is the point of our worship, if things do not change?<sup>6</sup>

In our passage Jesus doesn't provide answers. In fact he refuses to even return to those who lost their lives.

Next he tells a parable about a fig tree that isn't producing any fruit. Jesus isn't suggesting our questions don't matter; instead, he is suggesting he has a different lesson in mind.

The time had come for judgment. The fig tree was planted for only one reason: to bear fruit. It had failed in this task for three years running. Given this track record and in light of the limited nutrients in the soil in the vineyard it was deserving of death.

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy Rockwell. "Siloam and the Fig Tree." <<http://biteintheapple.com/siloam-and-the-fig-tree/>>

Those of you who were here last Sunday may remember that I preached about patience. I suggested that we would all do well to practice patience, to live into this fruit of the Spirit, and to view it as a godly virtue. This week, our passage speaks of God's patience with us.

Maxie Dunnam, past president and current chancellor of Asbury Theological Seminary, suggests that this parable emphasizes God's patience and mercy.<sup>7</sup> They and we are given another year or, if you prefer, an added measure of time. Judgment is coming, but it has been delayed one more time.

Dunnam explains that the parable can be applied to at least three contexts: (1) the nation, (2) the church, and (3) individuals. Each is worthy of our consideration.

The nation Jesus had in mind was the nation of Israel. Throughout the centuries the most common interpretation of this parable has been an allegorical one in which the fig tree represents Israel, the owner is God, and the gardener is Jesus. For our nation – for the United States of America – much can be said about whether or not we are living up to our potential when it comes to fruitfulness. On this Memorial Day Weekend when many are already thinking about our nation's past, perhaps a few moments of reflection on the present are warranted as well.

- How well is our nation really doing when it comes to our ideals of freedom and opportunity?
- How should we rate our nation when it comes to caring for those in need?

The church isn't an abstract entity; we are the church. When it comes to mainline American Protestantism, sociologists regularly publish stories of our fruitlessness. The last fifty years have been an era of ongoing numeric decline. While this isn't unique to the United Church of Christ or to the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, both have waned dramatically.

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<sup>7</sup> Maxie Dunnam. *Twelve Parables of Jesus* (Abingdon Press, 2006), p.52-55.

- Did you realize that over a 40 year period the number of Americans affiliated with a UCC congregation dropped from 11 to just 4.5 out of every 1000 people?<sup>8</sup>
- Were you aware that over a 40 year period the number of Americans affiliated with a NACCC congregation fell by 35% during a time when the population was growing?<sup>9</sup>

On the individual level the parable is speaking to you and to me. Don't worry if you are a perfectionist; God isn't holding you to your own impossible standard. God is, however, asking us to live as faithful followers of the Way of Jesus who live fully, love wastefully, and strive to be all that we are able to be.<sup>10</sup>

- Over the course of the past week, how would you rate yourself when it comes to loving God and loving your neighbor?
- Is your life marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?<sup>11</sup>

My message has included more questions than answers. Abundant life is not something that is mass produced. It is something that requires each of us to be authentic disciples of Jesus; it allows us to use all that we have and all that we are in ways that enrich our own lives and those around us.

The Scripture passage is clear.

The first story reminded us that life will end. How it ends or when it ends for each of us is not something we can know. Unforeseen tragedy is just one possibility out of many. We are, however, foolish if we think we will live forever or even if we think we need not worry about our life coming to an end before a certain date.

The second story reminded us that while we all deserve judgment, God is willing to be patient. God's prefers to extend grace, and to offer us yet another opportunity.

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<sup>8</sup> Trends in Large US Church Membership from 1960. <<http://www.demographia.com/db-religlrg.htm>>

<sup>9</sup> Association of Religion Data Archives. "National Association of Congregational Christian Churches." <[http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D\\_1462.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1462.asp)>

<sup>10</sup> The idea of living fully, loving wastefully, and striving to be all that we are able to be was originated, inasmuch as I know, by John Shelby Spong.

<sup>11</sup> These are the fruit of the Spirit. See Galatians 5:22-23.

R. Alan Culpepper, Dean of the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University<sup>12</sup>, explains:

The lesson of the fig tree is a challenge to live each day as a gift from God. Live each day in such a way that you will have no fear of giving an account for how you have used God's gift.<sup>13</sup>

Friends, let me be frank . . . I don't know how many days you or I may have left. I do, however, know that each of us can choose how we will live. It is a decision we are called upon to make or to renew each and every day.

Will you join me in striving to make the most of this opportunity?

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Mercer University. "R. Alan Culpepper." <<http://theology.mercer.edu/faculty-staff/culpepper/>>

<sup>13</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible. "Luke." (Abingdon Press, 1995), p.272.