

Lent 3C 2019, Luke 13:1-9, March 24, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church,
Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

A year ago Lois and I had a small brick retaining wall constructed for the postage stamp size front yard of our house. We had this done because the pachysandra wouldn't grow and we wanted to freshen up the space in front of our house. When the man built the wall he had to dig the dirt out to create the footer and this meant all of that hard clay got thrown up into the front yard. We planted a couple of bushes, but we must not have dug the holes wide enough, and we planted some flowers. Half the bushes dies and the flowers didn't do so well. So last week I went to the home and garden store and picked up four bags of soil conditioner to turn into the somewhat softened clay. I figured after the snow and rain we had it would be easier to dig the clay and mix in the conditioner which from what I could tell was a mixture of peat moss, bark mulch, compost, and manure. We're hoping we have better results for the bushes we're going to have to replace the new flowers we'll pick when the weather gets a little warmer.

I really felt like the vineyard owner in this morning's gospel reading. Trying to get something to grow, but the soil conditions just aren't right. He wants to dig the whole thing up, throw it on the burn pile and start over.

We know Jesus tells this story as a parable. He uses the common practice of cutting down fruitless trees and vines as a symbol of God's coming judgment. Recall the words of John the Baptist at the time he was baptizing the Jordan River: "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees," John proclaims, "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Let's just admit right from the very start that these are the parts of the Bible we often find uncomfortable. It's hard for us to hear words of judgment. We don't like hearing that there may be something fundamentally amiss with our lives, and that God has something to say about it. We would rather hear an affirming, loving God, who accepts us we are and doesn't want us to change a thing.

I think that's what's behind the first part of our gospel reading this morning. Some people approach Jesus and ask him about a group of Galileans who were killed by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate while they were offering their sacrifices in the Temple. We don't why they were killed. Maybe Pilate thought they were a threat to the peace. Still, behind this line of questioning lies and assumption they committed some terrible sin which brought down the wrath of Pilate.

The logic most people employed in Jesus' day said, "well, they must have sinned and that's why they are suffering. God disapproves of sin, and God is going to punish those who disobey him. So, to suffer as they did, must be a sign of God's anger."

Today we are more likely to attribute the suffering of others to bad lifestyle choices. “He got emphysema because he smoked all his life. He should have known better.” “Those people are poor because they’re lazy and all they want to do is drink and take drugs and make babies and not take responsibility for themselves.” “He had the accident because he was texting on his cell phone and we wasn’t wearing his seat belt and he shouldn’t been driving so fast after dark anyway.”

Attributing the misfortunes of others to their lifestyle choices is not really much different than other generations using sin as an explanation for misfortune. The result is the same; it doesn’t matter. In both cases those who aren’t suffering are trying to absolve themselves of responsibility. “Look at them and what they did. They got what they deserved. I’m glad I’m not like them. I don’t smoke. I don’t text while I’m driving. I always work hard and support myself. I’m not like them.”

Which makes Jesus’ words all that much harder for us good people to hear. “Do you suppose they are worse sinners than anyone else in Jerusalem, or Lancaster, or Millersville or Mountville? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you shall perish as they did.” Jesus refuses to get distracted by the question. He knows what’s behind it. It’s the natural desire to find someone who’s worse than we are, more blameworthy than we are, more responsible for their misfortunes than we are. He’s not going to get caught up in those distractions. He’s not going to allow us to get off the hook that easily. Everyone is called to repentance. No one gets a free pass. Each of us is responsible for examining our own lives and finding the ways we come up short of God’s expectations for us. We can’t point the finger at someone else and say, “look at them, look at what they’ve done. I haven’t done that.”

In light of Jesus holding up such a harsh mirror, the words of the gardener to the man wanting to cut down his fruitless tree are pure grace. Here the gardener, we don’t know who the gardener is, pleads for patience and a bit of forbearance for the barren fig tree. “Let me give it another chance,” he says. I’ll loosen the soil, give it a bit more fertilizer, a little extra TLC. Maybe it will be enough for the fruit to grow. Maybe the gardener could see something the owner doesn’t see. A bud almost imperceptibly starting to swell. A certain vigor starting to show itself in the branches. Or maybe it was just hope. Hope something different would happen. An unwillingness to rush to judgment and cut down a tree that just yet might bear fruit.

That’s how Jesus sees us. He’s the gardener who pleads on our behalf, who asks for a season of patience for us. We are trees that maybe don’t yet bear the fruit we should. Still, God is patient with us. He’s going to give us some more time and God is going to minister to us by feeding us and tending us’ digging around our roots, freeing us from that hard, dry soil that stifles our growth. Giving some air to

breath and allowing the living baptismal waters nourish our souls. Jesus will feed us with the fertilizer of life, his own Body and Blood for the forgiveness of those very things for which he calls us to repentance. He's a good gardener and he can bring forth good fruit, even from trees like ourselves. Amen.