

SERMON CCI Luke 13: 1-9 Figs, Anyone?

Our nation has become famous for mass shootings. Shootings in schools, in movie theaters, in workplaces, at outdoor concerts and festivals, even in places of worship. I still remember the young man who joined in with the Wednesday evening Bible Study at Emmanuel AME Church, a black church in Charleston NC in 2015. He prayed with them, then shot 9 of them to death. There was the mass shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg. In April of this year an event I not heard about: Isaiah Joel Peoples, while on his way to a Bible study group, intentionally ran his car into a group of people because he assumed that they were Muslims and repeatedly said "Thank you Jesus" after crashing into them. Such hatred.

And then all the devastating hurricanes and floodings, tornados and wild fires. There is another tropical storm headed for Bahamas right now. Why do these tragedies happen? Why does one person survive a shooting when 4 others do not? Why is one house left standing while all the other houses in a neighborhood burn to the ground or wash away. Why? After all, life *is fair*, right?

We can each tell stories of tragedies that have happened to people we know. They've happened to many of us sitting in this room. Car accidents, deaths of children, electrocution at work. And we ask "Why?" The people in today's scripture reading wanted to know why too.

Two terrible tragedies had happened in Jerusalem. In the first one, the Roman governor, Pilate, had killed some Galilean Jews while they were making their religious sacrifices at the temple. They weren't killed because they had committed crimes and were evading arrest; they were slaughtered while they worshipped! Like in Charleston! In the other incident, a stone tower near the pool of Siloam fell, killing 18 people who were around the pool. Why? They wanted Jesus to explain such things.

The common understanding of that day was that disease, suffering, poverty, and death were correlated with human sinfulness: the greater the sin, the more likely a misfortune will happen. And Jesus asked the question that is on our minds. Were the Galileans who died so tragically worse sinners than other Galileans? Were the people killed by the fallen tower worse offenders than everyone else in Jerusalem? We see this belief in other places in the Bible. Job's three friends and wife certainly believed this. They all tried their best to get Job to confess what sin he had done to deserve the sudden deaths of all his children, the destruction of his

home and land, and the painful sores he was suffering. "Just confess, Job, maybe God will relent!" Jesus' disciples believed this too. John's gospel tells of a day when Jesus and his disciples came upon a man born blind who asked Jesus to heal him. But before Jesus had a chance to heal him, his disciples asked Jesus who sinned and made the man blind- the man or his parents?

We may smile at their belief of a direct connection between sin and tragedy, but it's still around today. Following the attack on 9/11, televangelist Jerry Falwell said 9/11 occurred because of pagans, abortionists, feminists, "the gays and the lesbians" and the ACLU. After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Pat Robertson and Houston megapastor John Hagee both said it was the judgment of God. We still ask the question "WHY?" today. In a fair world, tragedies would only happen to those who deserve them, not to the rest of us. I could wish that was true because then we could blame the victims and know we were safe from such tragedy.

So what was Jesus' answer? This was Jesus' chance to clear this up once and for all. Two kinds of tragedies just like we have today. Did he say, "It was God's judgment," or "everything happens for a reason." He said, "No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Whether by an intentional act by a mass murderer or a natural disaster, tragedies happen, and they happen to people who are no more sinners than anyone else. Repent.

Repentance is one of those words that has gotten a bad name over the years. It reminds us of being shamed crying at the altar. It smacks of people on the street corner with signs that say, "Repent or go to hell!" and they seem like they would be just as happy if we did go to hell. But repentance is not about feelings of shame or guilt; it's not about feelings at all. To repent means to make a 180 degree turn toward God. Repentance is a change of heart and mind. It's the choice to turn from the direction we are headed back toward God. Jesus says we've all sinned and missed the mark of what God calls us to be. We all need to turn around. Repentance is not just for those who are guilty of specific sins, or those who suffer tragedy. Repentance is for all of us because we all fall short. Tragedies like mass shootings or natural disasters are not moments to judge those who suffer; they are moments to ask ourselves, "Am I faced in the right direction?"

Then Jesus told the story of a fig tree growing in the middle of a vineyard. It wasn't uncommon to have both grape vines and fig trees growing together. But this fig tree had not put out fruit for at least 3 years and the owner wanted to have

it torn out. It seems to be a story about judgment. John the Baptist had already spoken of a time when the ax would be laid to any tree that did not bear fruit. This tree had not produced fruit for three years. Was Jesus thinking of the three years he had been in ministry calling for people to repent and instead their resistance to him had grown stronger? So the owner of the vineyard says, "Cut it down!" But the vineyard manager asks for one more year during which he will pay more attention to the fig tree, fertilizing it, watering, digging, and then if it doesn't produce fruit, he will tear it out. Instead of judgment, that fruitless fig tree was given grace- it was given an extra year to do what it was created to do - produce figs.

Our lives are like that fig tree's extra year- sheer grace. God has given us everything we need to do what we were created to do- grow fruit. We have the Spirit to water our souls in worship and prayer, we have the Word of God to fertilize and feed us, provide nutrients needed to produce fruit, and his Son Jesus Christ shines on us, and tends to our every need everyday like the vineyard manager, encouraging us to grow fruit. Checking for signs of fruit.

So what does it mean to bear fruit? Galatians names 9 fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are what people who follow Jesus are like. In John 15, Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Bearing fruit is about being connected to Jesus and growing more and more like him, day by day. In our thinking, in our loving, our living, what we do, what's important. What did Jesus spend his time doing? Bringing healing to brokenness, giving his life for others, sharing the good news about God with others, standing for justice, feeding the hungry, loving, bringing joy. When Jesus checks on us looking for fruit, what does he find? Are we just using up the soil like the owner said about the fig tree- soaking in all God provides and keeping it for ourselves, or are we bearing fruit? Let's challenge ourselves this morning. Are we growing more loving, more faithful, more patient, more peaceful, do we have better self-control than a year ago? Are we more like Jesus than a year ago? Do we know God's Word better, do we pray more deeply, do we walk more in step with the Spirit than a year ago? Do our lives and words attract people to come find out about Jesus?

Church Board members, as we meet today after worship, will you be bringing forward ideas of ways to bear fruit together as a church? Do you pray in your

committees about bearing fruit? Are there other ways to be the church that bear more fruit than what you are doing now? Are there ways you are as a church that turn people away rather than draw them in? Are changes needed so you can bear fruit? In your outreach into the community, in worship, in Christian education, in caring for one another, in your Christian witness, in your giving. Pastoral Search Committee, as you invite the congregation to discuss with you what kind of church to be and what kind of pastor to call, will you imagine together ways to be fruitful – ways to make a difference in Jesus’ name, to invite others to follow Christ? Challenging questions, important questions.

This story in the life of Jesus began with questions about why tragedies happen. Is it because the victims were sinners and deserved it? And somewhere under all the questions of why is the very natural question of “How can I be safe?” We all want to be safe. If I’m a better person, or pray more, or go to church more, I give more, will it protect me from the tragic things that happen to other people? Will I be safe? Jesus’ parable of the fig tree tells us we’re asking the wrong question and need to repent, to turn around. We weren’t called into the kingdom of God to be safe; we were called into the kingdom of God to be fruitful. To seek first the kingdom of God, knowing all we need will come with it. If we’re busy growing closer to Christ, becoming more like him, in our ways of thinking and our choices, then when the end of our life comes, whether it is after a long healthy life, or suddenly and unexpectedly, our lives will have borne fruit, and we will have nothing to regret or fear.

Which way are we headed today? In our personal lives and as a church? Are headed toward God and his kingdom? Are they first in our lives? If not, let’s repent, let’s turn around today.

PRAYER

Father, we thank You for the gift of life. And we thank you for your patience and grace. In this quiet moment, we come back to you again because you are the God of second chances. We admit that too often we choose ways to be safe and comfortable rather than ways of being fruitful. We confess that too often we like things the way they are without considering the needs of others you want to call into your kingdom with us. Forgive us, Lord. Change our hearts we pray, make them ever more true. We invite you to come to us again, dig around our hearts like a master gardener, water us, shine your light upon us. We want to live the fruitful lives you created for us to live. In Jesus' name, Amen.