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Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Feckless Fig Trees"

Luke 13:1-9

We humans love to blame. When bad things happen, one of us is always showing up to point the finger and say, "**this** is why things went so terribly wrong."

Our love of blaming becomes even more obvious when it's on the large scale. Remember back a few years ago when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Most Christians simply mourned the devastation. But there was also a small group of pastors who speculated about why such an awful thing had occurred. Some said the hurricane hit because God was judging the U.S. for its abortion policy. Others said that it was God preventing a gay pride event that had been scheduled for a few days after. Other pastors said Katrina was sent as punishment for New Orleans' famed relaxed views on sexual behavior.

I can't help but wonder if Jesus would say to each of those pastors, "Do you really think that those New Orleanians suffered in this terrible way because they were worse sinners than you?" Now most of us here wouldn't have dreamt of saying the things that those pastors did about what caused Hurricane Katrina. BUT, I think when those people speak loudly enough we can wonder in our hearts, "*Did* New Orleans do something that deserved the devastation?"

I have a feeling that secret wonderings like those are what drove the people to ask Jesus about the Galileans murdered so horribly. Now there isn't any record outside of the Bible of Pilate mixing the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices, but everything else that history has recorded makes it clear that Pilate would have been capable of something so awful.

I think it's hard for us to imagine the scale of what this action would have meant to the Jews. "It was bad enough to be occupied by Pilate and his Roman minions when they did not commit atrocities, but here was an occasion...when he sent soldiers into the sacred precincts of the temple and had men...cut down like lambs to the slaughter. And not simply *like* lambs to the slaughter, but *alongside* sacrificial, slaughtered lambs, so that the blood of holy sacrifices and patriots ran together as one. What could possibly be more violent, more reprehensible, more deserving of condemnation?"¹

It's no wonder the people told Jesus that this had happened. It's the tickling fear that maybe, just maybe this people did something that deserved this.

But you know, there's a secondary fear that goes along with wanting to blame people for the suffering that enters their lives. We're not just worried that maybe God did punish them. We're also worried that those very same things could happen to us. And we want to push that possibility away from ourselves as far as possible. If we say that person X got terribly sick or had their house burn down or lost their pregnancy or whatever—and we can **explain** why it happened—well maybe it was because of their sexual orientation or because they were lazy or because they didn't eat the right food—it means that *maybe, just maybe, I won't get terribly sick. Maybe I won't suffer the loss of a child. Because I am not like them. I am different than they are.* Pinning reasons on people for their suffering gives us a psychological escape

¹ Rodney Clapp, "Pastoral Perspective," in Feasting on the Word. Pg 94.

route from the fear that those things could happen to me too.

And its root, our tendency to blame comes down to a fear of death. We are afraid of dying, and many of us are trying to deny the fact that we are going to die—some of us all the way until death is looking at us face to face.

I will say as a young person, it's crazy, but there is this weird sense when you're young that you won't get old and you won't die. I don't know if it's an evolutionary adaptation technique or the our culture's unhealthy glorification of youth or what, but there is a sense that even though every other single person except two have in fact died, maybe, just maybe I can get out of life alive.

But guess what! The reality is: *none of us are going to get out of life alive*. Surprise! Death, in fact, cannot be avoided.

But oh how we are tempted to avoid. We try to distance ourselves as quickly and as far as possible. We blame, we turn away, we hide.

Jesus knows all that is in our hearts, though. He knows how we hide from the knowledge of the briefness of our lives. He knew it when the people came to him shocked at the horrific death of the Galileans at the hands of Pilate, and you know what, he didn't try to protect the people from the knowledge that they too were going to die. He says, "I tell you, if you don't repent, you will all perish as those Galileans did." Unless you repent, unless you undergo *metanoia*, repentance—which is not so much feeling bad for sin as it is changing the direction of your life—you will perish and everyone will distance themselves from you as you have distanced yourself from those whose death you have feared. Unless you start walking the path of Jesus which willingly takes up its cross, your death will seem just as meaningless and senseless as those who died at the hand of Pilate.

See, what we need to remember is that Jesus is saying these things with his own death in mind. Remember that last week, Jesus set his face to Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is where his passion is going to occur. Jesus' ministry is now unable to be separated from his knowledge of his upcoming death.

Everything that Jesus has taught between the Transfiguration and now, we can only understand in the light of what is about to happen.

And what happens at the Cross? The only one who is truly righteous is judged and sentenced to death. The only one who out of all humanity across all time had nothing to be accused of, *was* accused and *was* tried and *was punished*. **The only blameless one was blamed.** We distanced ourselves from Jesus because we like the disciples fleeing in the garden of Gethsemane were terrified of death. His death. And our own deaths.

See that's the problem Jesus is pointing out. It's tempting to try to connect dots between bad things that happen and what someone could have done to deserve such suffering. But Jesus doesn't let the people who came to him two thousand years ago get away with that and he doesn't let us either.

Because then Jesus turns the tables on us. He confronts us with how our attempts to pin sufferings on others' immorality are at their core false. He points out that not only are we in threat of dying meaningless deaths, but we aren't all that great ourselves! As the saying goes, you point the finger but you have three pointing back at you.

And those three fingers in this case is the parable of the fig trees. See we had been getting up a head of steam trying to distance ourselves from the horrible death of the Galileans when Jesus turns the tables on us and compares us to homely

fig trees. And not healthy fig trees. Barren fig trees. Feckless fig trees. Fig trees that don't bear fruit, that don't have any efficacy in the world.

It's the original pot calling the kettle black. The Galileans had died a horrible death it was true, but the people standing in front of Jesus weren't all that different. Their dryness and sterility were headed for the same kind of death.

You know, when you're compared to a brown, shriveled fig tree it's becomes a little harder to judge. It's difficult to blame when we like sheep have all gone astray—when all of us are caught up in the web of sin. It's hard to say another's suffering is deserved when if we're honest if we used the same logic we'd be just as deserving.

Jesus takes away all of our defenses against death. All of the ways we try to protect ourselves from seeing the truth of our lives.

But he doesn't stop there. Because then he says about that little tree "Let it alone for open more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it." Isn't it funny, when God goes to work on this little fig tree, the Lord isn't some prim and proper gardener with wide-brimmed hat and gardening gloves tweaking here and snipping there. The Lord rolls up his sleeves and goes all the way to the roots of the tree, to the heart, the place where the life comes from. And at the roots what does God the gardener do? He digs around and he puts manure on it.

I don't know about you, but that's a little humbling to think about! We're shriveled up, bound for death, and what is our cure? Not a high-end fancy fertilizer, but the stuff that comes out the wrong end of a cow! The stuff that would normally make us turn up our noses and back quickly out of the room is part of our salvation. That merciful manure gives us nutrients that we couldn't have gotten elsewhere. Nutrients we need if we're not going to stay brown and shrivelly.

Manure is part of God's mercy. The icky stuff is part of God's goodness toward us, part of God's attempt to heal us.

You know, we are an old congregation. There is no hiding it. Just look around at one another. I think I've heard our average age is 80. Now for most of the world being old is a scary thing. As I said earlier, part of being young is sticking your head in the sand about getting old.

But you know what I think. I think that our advanced age is God's rich manure in our lives and in the life of the church. It's something that most people want to turn away from, don't really want to deal with, and yet it can hold a life-giving richness that is mercy for a people caught up trying to Botox and liposuction and diet their way to eternal life.

As one woman said to me the other day, "I don't worry so much about rejection anymore because if people reject me, well there's only about four or five more years left of that rejection till I'm out of here!" Old age can be a gift of freedom. Freedom from having to hide ourselves from death. Freedom from fear of others' deaths. Old age can be the fruitful fertilizer that the church needs so that we don't all succumb to the temptation of idealizing glossy, young models on magazine pages. It can be a time when we don't have to have to judge and blame others so much because we know how soon our own judgments are coming. Perhaps congregations like ourselves can as the Psalmist says teach the greater church and maybe even witness to the world that in numbering our days, we gain hearts of wisdom.

As many of you know, we are in Lent right now. Lent is the period of time when we walk with Jesus toward the Cross. It's the time when we have to pull our heads out of the sand and recognize that we're not getting out of life alive. And yet, during Lent is also the time when we remember that we don't have to fear death anymore. We who follow Life himself, we who

have turned ourselves toward eternal life do not have to fear. We don't have to fear meaningless deaths because we have witnessed life conquering death. We don't have to distance ourselves from others' suffering because we are following the Lord who willingly took suffering upon himself. We don't have to blame because we have been dug up and fertilized and brought back to life by one truly blameless and good gardener who wasn't afraid to get a little mud on his hands to watch us spring back to life.