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The Gospel of Luke
XLVI. The Fruit of Forgiveness
Luke 13:1-9

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A group of those around Jesus told Him about a recent tragedy. Pilate had murdered a group of worshippers in the Temple in Jerusalem – *“the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”* It’s not clear why this group raises this tragedy with Jesus. Maybe it was just fresh news which everyone outside Jerusalem was just now hearing – and they were hoping Jesus might shed some light on such a tragedy. Or maybe they were trying to trap Jesus into saying something bad about Pilate which they could then use against Him. We don’t know.

What we do know is how Jesus responded. He responds in a way that must have been shocking to those who heard Him – for His response shocks us still, two thousand years later: *“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”* And then Jesus adds a news item of His own, about a tower under construction in Siloam which had collapsed and killed those beneath it. He raises the same question: *“Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”* Whatever the crowd around Jesus that day was expecting Him to say, it couldn’t possibly have been this. And what are we, then, to make of what Jesus says in response to those two long-ago tragedies as He speaks these unexpected and disturbing words now to us this morning? *“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*

To begin with, I think we are invited to hear not just what Jesus says here, but also what He does not say. He refuses to explain these tragedies, to explain the why and the wherefore from God’s perspective – even though, if anyone could have done so, it would have been Him. And His silence on this question is somewhat frustrating. Because when tragedy befalls us, it is almost instinctively human to want to understand it, to explain it, to tell why it happened. We want that one correct answer to the questions raised by our broken hearts. In my time as a pastor I have heard just about all of these answers which we come up with. “God took your child because He needed another angel in heaven.” “She was given cancer in order that she could witness to the nurses in the hospital and bring them to Christ.” Or, succinct and right to the point: “It was God’s will.”

The novelist James Duncan calls this human tendency to offer quick and easy explanations of human suffering as “Answerizing.” And he goes on to say that:

Questions that tap into our mortality, our pain, our selfishness, our basic needs, questions that arise from the immeasurable darkness, lightness or mystery of our lives, require more than mere [Answerizing].¹

Not only so, but we also have to ask how do we know what we are claiming to know – I mean really and truly know that our answers, the explanations we are offering, are correct? If Jesus keeps silent, who are we to rush in with our explanations and answers? I mean, how do we know for sure that it was God who did this? How do we know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it was His will? We don't know.

And maybe that alone should cure us of this bad habit of answerizing to those who are grieving. We would do much better to acknowledge the truth of what Paul writes in I Corinthians 13 – that “*for now we see in a mirror dimly.*”² Jesus refuses to explain these two tragedies – and, therefore, we who are not Jesus would do much, much better, instead of answerizing, simply to comfort one another with the assurance of what we do know – which is that we can be there for them in what they are going through.

This better answer comes clear in Nicholas Wolterstorff's beautiful book, Lament for a Son. He wrote this book after he had lost his twenty-five-year-old son in a mountain-climbing accident. At one point in his book, in answer to the question, “*What do you say to someone who is suffering?*,” he says the best thing to do is to say little:

. . . just say, “I can't think of anything to say. But I want you to know that we are with you in your grief.”

Or even, just embrace . . . Express your love. How appallingly grim must be the death of a child in the absence of love.

But please: Don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.³

Not false explanations, but real offers of presence and kindness and care.

But if that is what we can take from what Jesus does not say in response to the two tragedies in Jerusalem, what then are we to take from what He does say? His words seem so harsh to us – we can scarcely imagine them coming from the mouth of Jesus. But, of course, that is our problem, not His. For He is the Word of God – and He would not speak these words to us if they were not the right words, if these words were not the true and right message from Him that we most need to hear: “*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*” And He says it not once, but twice: “*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*”

Those two tragedies – the murders in the Temple and the fall of the tower at Siloam – are used by Jesus as a reminder of something He has been telling us for a couple of Sundays now. A warning He has been trying to get through to His disciples there and then, and also to His disciples here and now. That there really is a time-factor in the struggle for our souls. That the most critical problem in our lives is that we are sinners, alienated from God and therefore on our way to a death we can neither foresee nor forestall. And thus that the central concern of our lives needs to be our turning back to God, our repenting of our sin before God, our being redeemed from our sin by God – before it is too late. *“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*

We have a hard time hearing this for at least a couple of reasons. One, because we don't really think of ourselves as sinners anymore. We did away with sin sometime, I think, back in the 1970's, when we were all Jonathan Livingston Seagull-ing our way into better self-esteem. Now we are all just basically good people who occasionally mess up in very minor ways – but, you know, I'm OK and you're OK and all of that sort of self-affirmation. Or at least that's what the world teaches us to think these days – we're not sinners; in fact, we're just fine the way that we are. But it is not what the Word of God says about us. So, who then are we going to believe – the world or the Word of God? An awful lot rides on that decision, says Jesus.

But we also don't like any of this business of sin and repentance and one day it could be too late because our mortality really is our greatest fear. We live in denial of it daily – but deep down it still rattles around in the basement which holds our deepest, darkest fears. That death could happen to us. That tragedy could befall us – literally, at any moment. That we, too – like those worshippers in the Temple and those workers at the tower in Siloam – that we too could die when we are not ready. It could happen. And we don't like being reminded of that, even by Jesus. We don't like being told that we are sinners and we don't like being told that we will, therefore, one day die.

But that is precisely what Jesus is telling us this morning. That we are sinners and that we will die – and that, therefore, now is the time to do something about both of those problems. Now is the time to repent, says Jesus. To turn back to God, who is our only escape, and confess our sins. To turn around our lives, so that they are facing in a God-ward direction. To turn our hearts and minds to this central and most critical matter of our existence – which is God and our relationship with God. *“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*

And so, then, also to hear and to understand the real motive, the real reason why Jesus says these difficult things to us this morning. For, you see, He speaks these words to us not just because they are true – that we are sinners and that we will die one day. He speaks to us these difficult, these in-your-face words to us – because He loves us. That's what is really going on in all of this. He loves us and He doesn't want the fact that we are mortal sinners to be allowed to separate us from His love. These words from Jesus this morning we are tempted to hear as harsh, and as if He were terribly angry with us – when, in fact, they are precisely the opposite. They are a declaration of a love for us so deep, so broad, so high, so strong that it desires never to let go of us, never to let us go away from Him. We hear, *“unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”* and we think we are met by an angry God, eager to punish us. But what we are really met by is exactly the opposite. We are not sinners in the hands of an angry God; we are sinners in the hands of a loving God who wants nothing more than to warn us in time, to save us in time, to have us abide with

Him, in His love, throughout time and forevermore. Love. His words to us this morning are fierce – because fierce is the strength of His eternal love for us.

And all of that – love – is what is in the parable He then tells. *“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.”* But the fig tree had produced no fruit for three years running. The owner of the vineyard says to the gardener, *“Cut it down. It’s nothing but a waste of good soil.”* But the gardener pleads with him, *“Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”* Did you hear the love?

It is a parable of God’s patience with us, first of all – a patience borne of His love. He is indeed patient towards us – He is giving us time to bear the fruit of repentance, that we might taste the fruit of His forgiveness. But not forever, of course. One day His Kingdom will come and the Book of Life will be closed to all not entered therein. And, of course, we each also have our own personal life-timer to think about – when will that run out? There will come a time when it is too late – but for now, out of His love for us, He is patient towards us; He is giving us time to hear and to receive and to respond to His offer of mercy and salvation. II Peter 3:9 – *“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”* And there it is again – love. God’s love for sinners, whom He so greatly desires to rescue and to transform into saints. *“Sir, let it alone this year also – give it a little more time.”*

But actually the parable speaks of more than merely the patience of God towards our sin and our need for repentance. It speaks of something going on in Jesus’ immediate circumstances as He tells this parable. Remember, He is on His way to Jerusalem, to the cross, to a death and resurrection which will open the door for our salvation – God’s solution to our problem of sin and death. And, again, it speaks therefore also to His powerful love for you and for me and for every human being on the face of this earth who was, is, or ever will be. Love – Jesus is going to the cross to show us how much He loves us, going to the cross so that our sin and death will be overcome, and the grace of a new and transformed and eternal life begun in us.

How am I getting all this from a story about an unfruitful fig tree and its patient gardener? It’s all there in one little word. That word spoken by the gardener when he says to the owner, *“Sir, let it alone . . .”* – “Let it alone” is actually just one word in the original Greek, *“aphes.”* It is a word which means not only “let it alone,” but also “forgive.” And it is the very same word Jesus will use as He hangs there on the cross for us. The gardener in Jesus’ parable says to the vineyard owner, *“Sir, let it alone (aphes) and I’ll tend to it and maybe next year there will be fruit.”* And Jesus, from out of the agony of the cross He bears for our sins, the death He dies so that we may have life – there on the cross Jesus says to the Father, *“Father, (aphes) – forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*⁴

In other words, in our Scripture this morning, Jesus is not only warning us to turn to God in repentance before it is too late, He is also pointing to the truth that God has provided for us the way, the means, the joyful possibility for us to do just that. God, you see, is not against us because of our sin. He is, instead, for us, in order to deliver us from our sin. His grace, mercy, and love are already given to us, showered upon us, even before we begin to repent. “Aphes” – let it alone,

Father forgive – that we might, in response, come home like prodigals into the endless embrace of His infinite love.

He warns us this morning, sternly, not to put it off – that there really will come a day when it will be too late, and who can say when that day will be. But He warns us because He loves us. He warns us because He longs that we should be His forever – and that this glorious and blessed forever should begin in us, and between us and Him, as soon as possible.

¹ Quoted in L. Gregory Jones, “Answerizing,” Christian Century, Vol. 115, No. 32 (November 18, 1998), p. 1121.

² I Corinthians 13:12.

³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 34.

⁴ Luke 23:34.