

“There’s Still Time”

Scripture: Luke 13:1-8

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William Willimon, a Methodist pastor (now a bishop), recounts the time that he stood in a hospital hallway with a mother whose child had been struck by a rare, often fatal illness. “Your little boy may not make it,” a doctor told her. And in that sterile, hard corridor, the mother grabbed Willimon by the lapel, pushed her face close, and said, “All right, preacher, tell me: Why did this happen to my little boy? What have we done to deserve this?”

Willimon was silent—a rare phenomenon: a speechless preacher. Would you want to explain it? I wouldn’t. I would claim silence, as tough an answer as that is. But at least silence would not be as tough as the answer that Jesus gave to a similar sort of question.

“Jesus,” some said. “O Jesus, did you hear about the Galileans who were worshiping in Jerusalem? They went to worship, to do what our faith requires, and they were massacred by the Roman governor’s soldiers. Why, why did it happen to them?”

Jesus himself, a Galilean who had gone to Jerusalem for worship—what would he say about this massacre, the needless killing, this unjust treatment? Why is it that these good people met with the sword?

Hear Jesus’ response:

“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ 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? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” [Luke 13:2-5]

Galileans who suffered because of the political situation. People of Jerusalem suffering from a natural disaster. Are they worse sinners than others? No, says Jesus, but unless you repent, you likewise will perish. Haitians dying by the thousands in direct result of an earthquake...a bomb going off in a busy market street in Baghdad...AIDs killing one out four adults in places in Africa. Are these worse sinners than you and me? No, but Jesus says, “Unless you repent, you likewise will perish.”

Jesus makes no distinction between suffering and pain caused by our inhumanity to each other or caused by natural causes. Pain is pain; suffering is suffering. I can imagine a whole range of pastoral responses that Jesus fails to give.

- Words of comfort—“Don’t worry, those Galileans have gone to a more blessed state...there in a better place.”

- Words about inscrutable choice of God—those precious sayings about “God took them home...God needed another little angel in the choir.”
- Or, if not precious and simplistic, a mysterious intoning, “It must have been God’s will.”
- And if not pious words, words of Stoic resignation: “Keep a stiff upper lip.” “Be a good soldier and bear with your duty.” Be like Hamlet and suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

All these possible responses to the world’s suffering are available to Jesus but he instead he uses them as a mirror of the fate we deserve. Jesus confronts us with a warning: the outrageous sufferings around us are a warning sign, calling us to change, to repent, to be different.¹

The question put to Jesus and our question is about the unfairness of suffering, confusion and tragedy. Jesus’ response cuts through the question to ask about our relationship to God. A God who does not act in ways that we expect, as in explaining and making clear the purpose of all human events. Rather we have a God whose presence makes suffering and tragedy bearable.

William Willimon, that pastor grabbed by the lapel in the hospital hallway, has a thought but not an answer to the question the woman raised—what do we deserve? Willimon suggests that the notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest 2000 years ago when we hung Jesus on the cross. Jesus was the most undeserving sufferer in human history. The notion that good living must bring good results fails here. Why does the cross happen to him?

This same Jesus takes our questions about why bad things happen to good me, and makes it cruciform, that is, gives it the shape of the cross. The broken body and the spilt blood do not explain the suffering but rather make it bearable and livable. The question of undeserved suffering turns out to be a shallow question, a surface inquiry.

Here are the deeper questions...the ones that really count:

Can you trust God, in joy and in pain, to be your God? Can you let go of your demand that God be God on your terms? Can you love God without linking your love to the cards that life deals you? God’s love carries no promises about good or bad, save the promise that God will not allow anything worse to happen to us than what happened to his own Son.²

Jesus’ response to why the good suffer is to deepen that question to how you and I will relate to God. How will we live as if God is in our lives—lives even of suffering, confusion, and tragedy?

Jesus lays it on the table—none of us are more or less deserving of suffering. Neither those Galileans massacred by the Roman soldiers nor the inhabitants of Jerusalem who were standing under the tower of Siloam at the wrong time. Neither the Haitians, Iranians, nor Africans, nor you nor me—none of us more or less deserving. So says Jesus, but then, as it were, he grabs us by the lapel and says, “But unless you repent, you likewise will perish.”

¹ See Richard Hays, “On Hearing Bad News,” *Christian Century*, 109:7, Feb. 22, 1992.

² Will Willimon, “When Bad Things Happen,” *Christian Century*, 106:6, Feb. 22, 1989, page 199

And with that “grabber,” Jesus relaxes his hold on our lapel and tells a parable, a story with a message. Jesus says: “*A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ 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?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’*” [Luke 13:6-8]

For three years the owner had looked for fruit from a fig tree, but none was to be had. So he says to the gardener, “Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?” It serves no purpose, get rid of it. No sense in it wasting part of the garden’s soil. But the gardener says to the owner, “Let it alone, sir. Let me pile up the manure around it (did you catch that fine detail...fruit happens when manure happens). In other words, says the gardener, let me work with it for another year, to see what fruit will come.

The point of the parable is that God will be patient. As one Biblical scholar has noted, the absence of judgment here and now cannot be construed as sign of righteousness or goodness. No, if judgment does not strike immediately, it is a sign of God’s mercy, not his approval. God’s mercy is extended; God will hold out for us to bear the fruit. A year—a year in the life of the fig tree.

The absence of judgment is not a sign that all is okay with us—it is sign of God’s patience. Our freedom from judgment is a gift...not an approval. Our freedom from judgment is a waiting time to bear fruit...for manure to be piled around us.

This opportunity time is sort of like one of my childhood experiences—perhaps some of you may have a similar childhood memory. It is a memory today sounds a bit like child abuse...but it was different day when I was growing up. The memory is this—often on long trips in cars that did not have technology (in those days, it was air-conditioning and a radio...not stereos, DVD players, GPS units, cell phones, iPods, and satellite radio!)...often on these long trips, my brother and I would get to picking and fighting in the back seat. After a few warnings from my father who was driving—warnings were completely ignored by the two of us—my father with one hand on the steering wheel and both eyes forward on the road would sweep his other hand backward and catch one or both of the passengers in the back seat who were fighting. Sometimes sweeping backhand even caught my sister who may or may not have been part of the squabbling. Typically, the hand caught only one of us...as usual as not, the more innocent or aggrieved party was the one who caught the brunt of the hand. When the hand caught my brother or my sister, I was actually quite pleased and was known to laugh out loud. When the hand caught me...well, how unfair! How righteously unfair to get a backhand from my father when brother was the problem!

Look again at the parable of Jesus—the absence of judgment right now is not the sign of our righteousness, of our goodness, of our deserving of reward. If we miss that swipe of the backhand, it is simply a postponement...a delay...mercy...patience.

There’s time for us now. There’s time now to ask the right questions of our relationship with God, and not be thrown off by the question of suffering and tragedy. There’s time now to lead the sort of fruitful life that God intends, and not to give up. God is holding out for us.

Jesus has just given what appears to be a harsh response to the question of undeserved suffering, with the finger pointed at the questioners: unless you repent, you will likewise suffer. Then comes the parable: there's time now for us. God extends the time for the fig tree to bear fruit. The owner gives one more year to the fig tree to respond to the best treatment the gardener can give. The time is not forever, the time is not unlimited. The time is not without a terminus. But there is still time.

How long is that year? How long does the grace of God extend? To the ne'er-do-well child, who has wandered from her upbringing? To the prisoner on Death Row who makes a final-hour conversion? To the dutiful person who has never done anything really wrong but lacks the resolve to take risks in mission and be extravagant in generosity. How long is that year, that year of God's accepting?

When does God's patience end? Augustine, one of the early Christian thinkers, has said that the Bible has only one death-bed confession. Recall the account of the thief on the cross who confesses his wrongful life and asks Jesus to remember him (it is the basis of our Lenten response to the prayer of confession, as we sing, Jesus, Remember Me). The dying thief on the cross (and most likely a murderer) says: "Jesus, remember me." And Jesus responds: "Today, you will be in Paradise with me." At the hour of his death, this thief is extended the grace of God: "Today, you will be in paradise with me."

So Augustine says, there is one death-bed confession in the Bible...there is always hope. There is one death-bed confession...but only one. Only one, lest we presume...lest we become complacent. God extends his mercy, his acceptance, his invitation to us. He is holding out for us to ask the right questions, to place our confidence in him no matter the cards that life deals us.

Cut down the fig tree? No, not yet. God holds out for us to bear the fruit of lives committed to Christ. Our questions about undeserved suffering go unanswered, but this call is sounded: there is still time for you and for me to bear fruit. There's still time.