

“Jesus Gives a Fig”

Lent III, Year C, Luke 13:1-9

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Rev. Rachel Knuth at Community Church of Sebastopol

I.

Some kinds of manure can be applied directly on plants— but in general, most manure is a bit too high in nitrogen to put on plants without burning their roots. In those cases, the manure has to be either aged or composted, to reduce its heat, which will allow the plants to have a better uptake of nutrients. To fertilize a fig tree in particular, you have to dig around the roots— which extend the same circumference as the canopy of the tree— so you have to dig out away from the trunk, and apply the composted manure there where the tree can access it best. You may wonder why I’m talking about manure, but my only excuse is that Jesus brought it up first. And if we can’t talk about the manure of life at church, where can we talk about it?

Our Bible passage today begins with the disciples coming to Jesus and asking if he’s heard about the terrible murder of innocent people— who were killed by Pontius Pilate while they were in the temple performing a ritual. We can hear the concern in their voices, all these centuries later. The Galileans executed by Pilate would have been Jewish people living under Roman occupation. They are an oppressed religious minority, and Pilate targets them precisely because of their religion. Then Jesus mentions the Tower of Siloam which was probably fresh in the minds of his audience but we don’t have much historical record of what happened. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus tells the blind man to go and wash in the water and be healed, that was at Siloam. It was a holy place for the Jewish people, and evidently a tower there toppled over, and 18 people died. So we have a political disaster and a natural catastrophe, both at religious sites, where Jesus clearly says the people did not deserve to die. In both cases, the disciples are shaken.

I haven’t spoken to a single person lately who isn’t shaken by the news coming out of Ukraine. Yes, the ancient Roman occupation of Jerusalem was brutal and oppressive. But we do not have to look far to witness brutality in the here and now. It’s not fair for people to die because they’re in the wrong place at the wrong time— a maternity hospital, a theater. They’re being targeted simply because they are innocents, and the intention of the aggressor is to break the spirits of the survivors who witness the brutality. And here in Sonoma County, on the other side of the world...we are like the disciples— we hurt when we see others suffering— we feel hopeless and want to do something to help.

So what does Jesus mean when the disciples bring a tragedy to him, what does he mean when he says “unless you repent you will perish as they did”? And then, how in the world does he take that and respond with the Parable of the Fig Tree? What is Jesus about here?

II.

Some good sermons on this parable say that it’s about second chances. Or it’s about not having to produce fruit all the time, that it’s ok to go through a season in life when we need nourishment. I think this parable is probably about all those things. Some preachers have divorced the parable from the rest of the story so they can address only the fig tree, not the context of the death of innocents. But I do think our Christian theology, and Jesus in this particular text, have something to say to the ache, the pain of tragedy in our world. And this moment in our world we need to mine this parable’s depths, because we are hurting— our hearts are broken by the war in Ukraine; we ache for transgender children in Texas and Idaho whose state governments are threatening to take them away from their parents and put them in foster care; it hurts to read about young athletes killed in a car crash on their way back to college after a tournament. Yes, this parable is about second chances and not being pressured into being fruitful all the time, and being worthy of God’s love even when we don’t produce. But given all that’s happening, right now I wonder what we’ll find if we dig a bit deeper.

Ultimately aren’t the disciples asking why bad things happen to good people? How is the Parable of the Fig Tree any kind of response to the problem of suffering?

III.

Jesus begins the parable with a person who owns a vineyard with a fig tree, but has a gardener taking care of it. The owner comes looking for fruit but finds none, and wants to cut it down— why should it be wasting soil? But the gardener intervenes. He suggests digging around its roots and putting manure down— and waiting another year to see what happens. “If it bears fruit, good and well; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Theologian William Herzog once wrote that Jesus is a wisdom teacher of the oppressed. And that the parables of Jesus have hidden messages that reveal injustice, and are meant to challenge the boundaries of a closed world. In this way, Herzog says, parables are meant to be “subversive speech.” So, if parables are meant to be subversive, What exactly is being subverted here?

I wonder if Jesus is saying that when innocent people die before their time, they aren't given a second mulching like the fig tree. In fact, they don't have any chance to change the systems that oppress them— in this case because of their religion. But the disciples do. And perhaps the subversive word from the parable is this:

When you see injustice, be a witness to the pain and let it change you at your roots. All that manure, all that compost you're witnessing right now, take it and put it at the base of your tree and let it change you. It would be a shame if – when you die— you haven't taken the chance to be changed through your witness (because then you would perish as they did).

I think there's a difference between gawking at suffering, and being a witness to it. Nothing changes the system when tragedy unfolds and we rubberneck, and then go about our business. Rather, becoming a witness to suffering requires that we allow our selves to be changed by it at our very core. To be a witness means to name the truth of a situation and let Christ's presence be known in it. In shifting the focus from the tragic deaths to the parable of the fig tree, Jesus shifts the focus to the disciples and their responsibility in creating justice in the world.

To name the truth of a situation and let Christ's presence be known in it means that God is with those who suffer. God is powerful and present in Ukraine, with families facing injustice in Texas, with innocent victims of a car crash. God is powerful and present— with the person living with cancer who is getting a port for chemotherapy, with the parents receiving news about their child's health, with the family of a loved one who has died... God is with us—even when we are the tragedy. Yes, God has a way of drawing new life out of the most dire situations, and God comes close to people who hurt—that is what it means to be a believer in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Galileans and innocents of Siloam are cut down— not because they are wasting soil, but because of the circumstances around them. Maybe the question isn't why bad things happen to good people but— What can we do next? Transgender children and their parents are not being targeted because of any wrong they've done but because the system that allows political officials to attack them is broken. The people of Ukraine cannot change their geography next to an aggressive and brutal invader. So as disciples of Jesus ourselves, perhaps in this very moment, we are being called to dig around our roots, and water these tragedies into the ground around us. Because when we are not gawkers, but witnesses, we are necessarily changed by our experience and view of injustice. Give it a year, and see what fruit we grow.

IV.

Lent is a time when we consider what it means to repent— which literally means to change. There's a lot of manure out there in the world. Backing up a giant truckload of hot manure and dumping it on our roots is probably going to burn us. But what if we put a few shovels-full, just enough to impact us at a core level? Just enough to nourish growth. What would God call out of us, how would God call us to grow, if we did that? Because we only get one wild and precious life. In a few weeks we will tell another story of Pontius Pilate and the blood of an innocent first century Jewish man. We will be called upon not to gawk, but to witness pain. And not to stop there but to allow that witness to transform us, even as Jesus is transformed, into new life, into fruitful people of the resurrection. In her short story, *The Dominion of Roots*, Therese Mailhot, a First Nation writer from Canada, says, "There are many wrong ways to die. The right way to live, in this world, is to be rooted here." Maybe we all need a little nourishing compost to face everything in the world right now, because being a witness is hard work.

I don't know if you were driving around Sebastopol last Saturday morning. But if you were, you were sitting in long lines of traffic in all directions. Maybe you already know why: There was a free compost giveaway at the Community Center. It turns out, people are hungry for good soil. People are longing for the kind of compost that's just right for uptake of nutrients. But to be a gardener is also to hope— to hope that out of all the manure, something beautiful and juicy and good might grow. May it be so.