

**Isaiah 55: 1-9**  
**Luke 13: 1-9**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**February 28, 2016**

The passage from Luke's gospel has two parts. The first presents Jesus' response to comments about tragedies and outrages that were part of the news of the day. The second is a parable about repentance. Regarding the first part: there was a story about the governor of the land, Pontius Pilate having murdered some Galileans in the Temple and combining their blood in the Temple sacrifices. Then there was the report that a tower near the pool of Siloam had fallen and killed eighteen people.

The first story sounds like ones that circulate on the internet and are believed by those who already believe the worst of a person and love scandalous stories regardless of their truth. The second has the ring of reality. Tragedies like this happen nearly every day. We hear of mass shootings, collapsing buildings, devastations of hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, bridge and building collapses. Inevitably come the questions: why did this happen? Who is responsible? Why would God allow this? For those who believe that there is a God who *does* cause tragedies and natural disasters the next question becomes, why, of all the people in the world, were *these* people chosen to die? The assumption is, of course, that they must have done something to *deserve* this fate, this divine punishment.

It is significant that Jesus does not engage in any of the debate. He does not affirm the reality of Pilate's supposed atrocity. He does not address the event of the fall of the tower. Instead he responds to the underlying question. The ones who died were no better or worse than anyone else. Forget whether or not *they* deserved to die as some righteous punishment

for their sins. What about *you*? What about the rightness of *your* soul? Is *your* heart in the right place? If God is the kind of God you think he is *you could be next!*

Jesus suggests to the people around him that, if they are honest, their interest in the supposed atrocity and the tragedy of the fallen tower is less than disinterested. He is, not so subtly, suggesting that if they are honest, there are at least two motives for their concern.

The first, I propose, is that they want to shore up their sense of self-righteousness. After all, the tragedy did not happen to *us*. *We weren't* punished. *We* must be in better standing with God than *those* people.

Yet I also suspect that there is a deeper, more shadowy reason for this interest in why some suffer and not others. It is the fear that, perhaps, the same fate *could happen to us!* And if that is so, how can we avoid it?

If we can discover why a person suffered we can see how we are different such that this fate could never happen to us. We often see this in responses to someone's illness. There must be some *reason* this person got cancer, or a degenerative neurological disease. There must be a *reason* someone developed Alzheimer's disease or a birth defect. There must be a *reason* a child becomes afflicted with drug addiction.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus responds to a question regarding a man born blind, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" This is more than a theological question. It indicates a deep fear. If I can identify the cause of the illness, birth condition, traumatic development in a life, then I can distance myself from it and feel safer.

You remember Jesus' response, "It was not that this man *or* his parents sinned, but that the works of God could be made known in him." (Jn. 9:3) That work was made known through

the man when he received his sight. God is not the *cause* of suffering. God is the *redeemer from* suffering. God didn't send Jesus to save some and not others. God sent Jesus so that the entire world could be saved. As John writes in chapter three, "For God *loved the world* so much that he gave his only son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." John continues, "God did not send the son into the world *to condemn* the world, but that *through him* the world might be *saved*." (Jn. 3:16-17)

Jesus reveals that God is not the great cosmic meanie who visits suffering on humanity. Instead God is the cosmic healer, redeemer, lover, listener, compassionate presence which gives humanity hope and courage and strength to face, endure and even find joy in the midst of suffering. God seeks to make himself known as the one whose healing and loving is witnessed through those who suffer, but who witness to grace and not self-pity, gratitude for life, not bitterness, through quiet trust and not anger. In addition, God is known in and through the tender and selfless care of the people who walk with those who suffer.

In my ministry with residents of three adult care facilities I have been inspired by how many people who have lost their homes, health, family members and their independence yet know how to laugh and praise God. They witness *to me!* Their testimony proclaims that life is so much more than the conditions of life. They tell me with their singing and openness to God that if they can be joyful at this stage of life, so can I!

The same can be said of any human condition: cancer survivors, people with severe disabilities, people who are homeless, jobless, in prison, people who have lost loved ones. The greatest testimony to God is the trust of a broken heart and the gift of eyes that are set on God and not on our suffering.

This, I propose is the fruit of the spiritual life: trust, patience, hope, faith and joy—even in the midst of sorrow, pain and fear. It is the fruit the owner of the vineyard looked for in the fig tree. I do not identify God with the owner who is threatening to cut the tree down. He is the gardener who offers to tend the soil around the tree, to prepare the ground to allow it to bear fruit.

To the extent that there is implied judgment in the parable, I propose that it lies in the warning that life is short. Do we want to spend our lives filled with fear, resentment, anger, guilt, shame, self-pity and jealousy? Or rather do we want to bear fruit that comes from a deep inner peace that the world cannot give, but only God in and through Jesus Christ? Amen.