

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 55: 6-9
SECOND LESSON: Luke 13: 1-9
March 20, 2022
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

“Things that Are Hard to Understand”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

When bad things happen we look for a reason. And sometimes there are no good reasons. In 2006, a much beloved 20-year-old college student from this congregation named Dennis Muttu collapsed the day after Christmas during a football game. A week later he was taken off of life support. A previously unknown congenital malfunction in the arteries in his brain was discovered. I had known Dennis for years. Dennis was an absolutely wonderful human being. And did knowing the cause of his death make it any better? No. For me it made it worse. I yelled at God for months, the God who knew that from his conception Dennis had a time bomb in his brain waiting to go off. I grieved.

This past week a young woman and her unborn baby were critically injured in the bombing of a maternity hospital in Ukraine. Both later died. And even more recently a theater sheltering children was bombed. There are no good reasons for these atrocities, no reason that those who died were in the wrong place at the wrong time while others survived. While it is true that there are things that happen to us that are a direct result of our own folly, it is the pure randomness of most tragedy that makes it so hard for us to deal with.

Historically some have taken a “blame the victim” approach to disaster. Either that person or their family must have done something wrong. What happened is punishment. The disciples asked Jesus about a man born blind who had sinned—the man or his parents? Jesus said neither. But psychologically we can understand why some people find comfort in blaming the victim, because then life isn’t random. Then we can do something to make sure it doesn’t happen to us.

The people approached Jesus on this occasion with a tragedy. It was the result of the actions of an evil political leader, much as the situation in Ukraine. A group of Galileans came to offer their sacrifices in the Temple and for some reason Pilate’s soldiers had a confrontation with them that resulted in their slaughter. We do not have any outside source about this particular event, but it was not out of character for Pilate or his troops. In a letter to the emperor Caligula, Agrippa I described Pilate as “inflexible, merciless, and obstinate” and said he had committed “many acts of cruelty.” Of course, complaining to someone like Caligula about depravity was no doubt a waste of time, but Agrippa at least tried. The group of Galileans had done **nothing** to deserve what happened to them. Jesus went on to name a second situation that was

even more random. Eighteen people were in the wrong place at the wrong time when a tower in Siloam fell. They didn't DO anything to deserve this. God wasn't punishing them. A tragedy just happened. These are the things in life that are hard to understand, things that leave us fearful and confused.

When bad things happen, we want to assign blame. Someone has to be at fault, even if that someone is God. Even insurance companies blame God! "Acts of God" are part of policies, mostly to mean a catastrophic event that wasn't directly caused by humans, like floods, earthquakes and storms, that they have no intention of covering. We might have expected Jesus to give at least some words of comfort in hearing about this tragedy, but he didn't do that. Instead, he pushed back on the idea that the victims must have done something to bring this calamity on themselves, asking, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" And, "Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Jesus said no to both, but he then went on to say, "But unless you repent, you too will all perish." This appears to be a very mixed message.

Jesus then shifted gears. He went from "bad things happening to good people", or at least average people, to good things happening to a bad tree. He told a story. A man had a fig tree that was not producing fruit. He looked for three years and there was none. Now, according to the rules of the time if this was a newly planted tree, then no fruit *should* be harvested for the first three years, and the fourth year's harvest should be given to God so only in the fifth year would the owner get fruit. We don't have any idea how old this hypothetical tree was, however, only that it was not bearing fruit. So the owner went to his gardener and said, "*Cut the tree down! It's a waste of space. Why should I let it use up the soil?*" The gardener, however, made a plea on behalf of the tree. And not only does the tree get a year's reprieve, the gardener will go out of his way to dig around it and fertilize it. If after all that it doesn't bear fruit, then okay, cut it down.

The gardener is motivated by compassion. He planted the tree, watered the tree and watched it grow. He is invested in this tree. The owner just wants the income. This allegory doesn't have exact parallels because God seems to be both the owner and the gardener, wanting fruit now but then going out of his way to give the tree every chance to produce fruit. In the same way God is invested in us. God doesn't want to lose us. God will work in us and give us every chance to turn to God and become fruitful. That is the good news. The not so good news is the reprieve will not last forever.

Jesus teaches that we should not conclude that someone is being divinely punished when tragic events happen to them. Equally, we need to be wary of concluding that God is rewarding a person when they have an easy life. Life is fragile. It is unpredictable. But we build illusions of safety around ourselves. We accumulate things to give us security. We move to "safe" neighborhoods. But sometimes we can do everything right and tragedy happens anyway. Nine people, most of them young student golfers, were killed recently in Texas in a head on collision. A tire blew out on the truck being

driven in the opposite direction causing it to swerve directly into them. It didn't help that the driver was 13. They were in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time. The principal of Lower Merion High School, Sean Hughes, was killed this year in another tragic car accident. He was in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time. This is terrifying. We desperately want more control so these things don't happen to us. But the way the universe is constructed, randomness is built in. And given the total vulnerability of our situation and the fact that none of us knows what tomorrow may bring, Jesus says the time to repent is now. The time to be right with God is now. Not because it will necessarily save us from suffering, but because our relationship with God has eternal significance and the matter is urgent. Jesus is saying we should live as if *we will be talking with God TONIGHT about what we did TODAY*. And if we are unfruitful trees, the good news is we have help. God will dig around our roots and fertilize. God will water with the Spirit. God will do all things to help us become what God designed us to be.

Jesus calls us to repentance in order to achieve this, but what exactly is repentance? Many of us have a stereotypical image from a bygone era of an evangelist carrying a board proclaiming "repent and be saved!" And certainly, there is a long tradition of preachers petrifying people into "repenting". Medieval and renaissance art graphically shows sinners burning in hell. Jonathan Edwards preached "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in Massachusetts in 1741 and scared thousands into repenting of their sins. Fear and shame have been used against people for centuries because they are potent tools. But they are short-cuts that can also backfire, because God wants us to be restored to a relationship of love and trust. Shame and terror tend to defeat that. Fear may temporarily stop someone from doing things that are wrong, but it will not enable the heart change necessary to live in love. To use a gardening metaphor, it may pull out the weeds, but unless something is planted in their place the soil will be barren and the weeds will be back. What repentance really is, is a complete inner turnaround in orientation. We turn away from selfishness and deception and we turn to love, grace and truth.

Jesus does not explain the problem of evil to us, and it is the one burning question that most people have. If there is a loving God, how can these things happen? If God is perfect and all powerful, why is the world such a mess? If God wants us to pray, why is it that prayer will not necessarily give us the outcome we want? Jesus doesn't tell us. He doesn't blame the victims. He does, in other places, call out the perpetrators of evil. But what we don't get is a theological answer to our question of "Why?" probably because we would not understand it. We are limited by our own corporeal existence. We only understand things in terms of this world, and we don't have the capacity to think outside of this world. We are like ants trying to understand quantum physics. God says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." Perhaps when we are no longer limited by our current physical bodies we will understand more, but not yet.

Because we are incapable of grasping God's purposes behind allowing evil and suffering to exist Jesus simply points us in another direction. Given the insecurities of life, how will we live? Will we be prepared for life outside of

this world? Will we “repent” and turn from a limited self-centered point of view to looking at the world from a God-centered perspective? We want an answer. What we get is advice. We will not understand why there is suffering in our world, but we can live in such a way to as alleviate it, and we can turn our lives around and walk with God. Amen.

Isaiah 55: 6-9

6 Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.

7 Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

8 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.

9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13: 1-9

1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. **2** Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? **3** I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. **4** Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? **5** I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. **7** So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

8 “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. **9** If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”