

Luke 13:1-9

Remember those automobile trips you took with the family... the kids in the back seat complaining, "You're touching me!" "No, you're touching me!" "Mom, he's touching me." Or "Mom she's looking at me!!" ...

I know, it's Lent, but one of my fondest Christmas memories is the year when three of us four kids descended on my parents in Florida for Christmas vacation. My brother from New Hampshire, me from Colorado, and my sister flew in from Australia where she lived at the time. One of the things among many that makes this Christmas memorable was the trip to Sebring, about 1 ½ hours south east of Tampa, from Homosassa Springs which is about the same time north west of Tampa. We went to eat dinner with my mom's cousin's. Here we were, adult children, living grown up adult lives, turned into little kids as we shared the back seat of my parent's mini van. I'm not so sure my parents thought it was as funny as we kids did.... I think it most likely brought back the real fights we had in the back of the car....

Most people don't like fights, but the world is full of chances to pick them, to blame, to point fingers. It seems right now, after spending a couple of years with a pandemic and all the restrictions it brought, that it is a volatile time in history. Especially now that Russia has invaded the Ukraine. We have someone to point a finger at now, someone to call the enemy. Some one to blame, they don't play fair, they aren't like us, they don't value what we value. Kindness has gone out the window.

And what does all this have to do with anything? Or at least with our scripture text for this week? Surely Luke doesn't present us with a political hornet's nest designed to pick a fight. Does he? It kind of seems like it with this obscure historical reference and an even more obscure parable about a fig tree. Do they even have anything to do with one another?

Yes, the parable is Jesus' response to the unnamed persons' reference to the Galileans who were killed making sacrifices, and to the tower of Siloam that fell on people, two historical events that aren't even mentioned anywhere other than this morning's text from Luke.

One of the questions we have to ask is, "Why did they tell Jesus this story?" Or why did they pose this puzzle to him? Did they really think he hadn't heard that one yet?

There were rumors going around. Even though he wanted to keep Jesus from being crucified because of a dream his wife had, which is recorded in Matthew 27:19, Pilate wasn't a nice guy; he was a typical Roman ruler. Ruthless to the core. He didn't want to be in this out of the way, backwards town. He wanted a big city to rule over. So he took it out on the inhabitants. He was constantly taking the temple money as his own, revoking the special status of the temple treasury. Like all Roman governors, he would blaspheme, proclaiming himself to be a god to be worshipped. He frequently limited Jewish holy day celebrations by making decrees that kept the Jews from holding a full celebration.

It was a tumultuous time. Uprisings were expected in Jerusalem, so Pilate sent soldiers as undercover spies to find who was behind them. Roman soldiers were brutal, just like their leader. They found who they wanted to make an example, some men making sacrifices right in the courtyard of the temple, and the blood of those men mingled with the animal sacrifice blood. The temple was defiled, unclean, until the proper rituals could be performed.

Would Jesus take sides on this issue? Would he be the leader of the revolution to respond to this heinous act? Or were they just looking for an answer to why this happened?

No matter what they were looking for, Jesus wasn't going to give in to them. And he didn't respond directly regarding the sins committed, whether they were worse sinners than others. A sin is a sin, whether it seems more atrocious to us doesn't make a difference, there is no level to sin. And terrible things do happen to good people and to bad people.

But Jesus doesn't drop it there, he goes on with a parable about repentance, grace and growth. If sinfulness isn't the reason these men died, then why do we need repentance? Because repentance isn't about dying, it is about living.

The tree in the parable was taking up space. I think everyone wants to not just take up space, but to have a purpose in their life, to produce fruit. We can think of ourselves as the tree, when we are given grace, or nurtured, we are given the opportunity to grow, to produce fruit.

Or we can be the gardener. We can be the ones who compost and fertilize, giving life, grace, to other persons. But we can't do that if we don't know repentance, grace, and life. That's why this pericope is so important during this time of Lent. It is a reminder that we need to take time to examine our life and to be repentant. We need to take time to realize how God's grace has been shown to us through Jesus Christ. We need to have life in Jesus, Jesus in us.

I invite you to pay special attention to your time with Jesus this week, as will I. Ask the Holy Spirit to point out to us what it is we need to change to make our lives more Christ-like, and then to give us the willingness to make those changes. All glory be to God.