From Judgement to Grace

Lent III, March 20, 2022

Luke 13: 1-9 Russell Mitchell-Walker

There are times in our lives when something horrible and unexpected happens and we wonder why me? What did I do to deserve this?? A sudden death of a child. A severe case of cancer or terminal or chronic illness. Victims of floods, wildfires or other disasters. Those in Ukraine and those who are Ukrainian have probably had these questions, as they witness the slaughter of innocents. Adele Halliday, the United Church of Canada Anti-Racism and Equity Lead Staff [shares](https://united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/hard-lessons-racism-begin-young-age) the experience of her daughter being called names in the playground that started when she was three years old, who asks questions like: “Is there something wrong with my skin colour? Is my skin colour ugly? Is there something wrong with me? Did I do something wrong, as to why other kids are calling me names?”.

In the gospel reading for today, Jesus challenges this kind of thinking that there is a reason for the suffering we experience. It was very prevalent in the culture of the time that there was a strong wide-spread, taken for granted, deeply held, bed-rock belief was that everything happened for a reason. That if something bad happened to someone it must have been because of something bad they did and they deserved it. In the story, Pilate has slaughtered some Galileans in the temple while they were offering sacrifices. As well, a tower had recently collapsed, killing 18 people. Jesus’ response to the two incidents, that these victims were no more sinners or offenders than anyone else, would have shocked the listeners and challenged their present view. We could ask, if this is the case, if this was Jesus’ teaching, then why do we still find ourselves stuck with this kind of thinking as well? Too often religion uses fear and bad theology to keep people faithful and in line.

Kate Bowler knows this well. Kate is a professor at Duke University’s Divinity School who was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. She was also involved in prosperity gospel communities which believe that if you follow God and are faithful you will be rewarded. The corollary of that is if bad things happen you must not be faithful enough. She wrote a book of her cancer journey and challenges with faith and well meaning people, called [Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved](https://katebowler.com/books/everything-happens-for-a-reason/). In the book she addresses [8 things](https://www.christiantoday.com/article/8-things-you-shouldnt-say-to-someone-with-cancerexecute1/125004.htm) you should not say to someone with Cancer (and I would add, other tragic experiences). She calls this a short list!

1. *‘Well, at least*…’ Whoa. Hold up there. Were you about to make a comparison? At least it's not . . . what? Stage V cancer? Don't minimize.
2. *'In my long life, I've learned that . . .'* Geez. Do you want a medal? I get it! You lived forever. Well, some people are worried that they won't, or that things are so hard they won't want to. So ease up on the life lessons. Life is a privilege, not a reward.
3. *'It's going to get better. I promise.'* Well, fairy godmother, that's going to be a tough row to hoe when things go badly.
4. *‘God needed an angel.'* This one takes the cake because (a) it makes God look sadistic and needy and (b) angels are, according to Christian tradition, created from scratch. Not dead people looking for a cameo in Ghost. You see how confusing it is when we just pretend that the deceased return to help you find your car keys or make pottery?
5. *Everything happens for a reason.'* The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons. … When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.
6. I've done some research and...' I thought I should listen to my oncologist and my nutritionist and my team of specialists, but it turns out that I should be listening to you. Yes, please, tell me more about the medical secrets that only one flaxseed provider in Orlando knows. Wait, let me get a pen.
7. 'When my aunt had cancer...' My darling dear, I know you are trying to relate to me. Now you see me and you are reminded that terrible things have happened in the world. But guess what? That is where I live, in the valley of the shadow of death. But now I'm on vacation because I'm not in the hospital or dealing with my mess. Do I have to take my sunglasses off and join you in the saddest journey down memory lane, or do you mind if I finish my mojito?
8. So how are the treatments going? How are you really?'This is the toughest one of all. I can hear you trying to understand my world and be on my side. But picture the worst thing that has ever happened to you. Got it? Now try to put it in a sentence. Now say it aloud 50 times a day. Does your head hurt? Do you feel sad? Me too. So let's just see if I want to talk about it today because sometimes I do and sometimes I want a hug and a recap of American Ninja Warrior.

Note that these are from Kate’s perspective and experience and they can be helpful issues to consider and remember.

When reflecting on this question of why do bad things happen to good people, we look to Jesus, who lived a righteous life, faithful to God, an example to us all, yet he was crucified. This again turns the conventional thinking on its head. Jesus was crucified and resurrected. We often see the resurrection as the reversal of death and sin. What if it is the affirmation of the crucifixion? An affirmation that love and vulnerability are the way, God’s way? I often name it as an affirmation of all the Jesus did in his life was right and good. The way he lived love, and taught peace and justice. What would this kind of love and vulnerability look like in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict? This is a tough, but important question that we all need to reflect on and address. I do think we see vulnerability demonstrated in president Volodymir Zelenskyy, who refuses to leave Kyiv and posts daily videos revealing where he is. This makes him quite vulnerable to potential attack, but he faces the crisis with courage and hope.

In Jesus’ response, he also says ‘unless you repent, you will perish as they all did’ referring to the two tragedies. Now Jesus is not saying that if you don’t repent, you will be punished or have bad things happen to you. He is saying to turn away from the present thinking so you will not be caught unprepared for sudden events and challenges that will come. Living with God, in Christ, we remember that we are not alone, God is with us when bad things happen. We are to live each moment fully, because life is short and worth making meaningful. Jesus is building on all that he has been saying the last number of chapters, to work for the kingdom, shalom, build peace and justice, stand with those who are poor and oppressed, resist the empire. This is the calling of God, the work and ministry God calls us to. Jesus then tells a parable about a fig tree not bearing fruit and the landowner wanting to cut it down. It is in it’s third year of growth and fig trees generally take four years to bear fruit, so the landowner is being impatient and even a little ignorant, in not understanding what his trees need. The gardener convinces him to give it another year. It is given a second chance. There is grace. This is the message for us as well. God gives us second chances. God is not about judgement but grace. And that is where there is hope. We may not always be perfect, or do the right thing, but God’s love and grace is such that we can try and try again as we seek to follow him, bear fruit, and build the kingdom. We seek to build a community where people are supported who are going through tragic and challenging times, letting go of judgements and questions or assumptions that can feed conventional thinking, to offer hope and love and vulnerability, which sometimes may mean just sitting in silence and being with. May we draw on that support and love as we need it in our lives and offer it to others in need when we can. May we offer hope to bear fruit as we embrace the grace of second chances, and the presence of God with us in tough times.