

Luke 13:1-9

When something horrible happens to someone we know or love, it is natural to ask “why?” There are many tragic and painful events which occur daily, which trouble our hearts and create questions in our minds.

Our gospel reading today tells of some people who approached Jesus and asked his opinion about two incidents which raised the same questions. One apparently took place at the temple in Jerusalem, when Pilate ordered some Galileans killed while they were in the act of making animal sacrifices to God; the blood of those devout worshipers became mingled with the blood of the animals. The other incident took place not long before that. The tower of Siloam, which was part of the fortification of Jerusalem, had collapsed, killing 18 persons. Now the people approached Jesus and asked, “Why do those kinds of things happen?” Did they happen because the people involved were so wicked that the tragedies were God’s judgment upon them? Jesus gives no helpful explanation, he simply sidesteps the huge question of why there is pain and tragedy in the world, and he tells the parable of the fig tree to focus on the purpose of human life. To him the question is not, “Why do people die the way they do?” but “Why are we given life?”

With the parable of the fig tree Jesus reminds the people of his day that Israel had a noble calling; God had planted them on earth for a particular purpose. They were to be a special people, agents of God’s mercy in the world, and they were to bear fruit befitting that holy cause. In other words, instead of calling God into question and asking, “Are the misfortunes of life God’s doing?” Jesus turns the tables and asks, “What are you doing in the world?” You have been called to repentance because you have not blessed others as God has blessed you. Jesus indicates in his story that their lives have been barren, the fruits have not been forthcoming; they as a people are virtually useless to God. Yet the story has a tone of hope. Jesus recommends that things be stirred up around them, that the people be fed and the branches pruned, so that with tender care and nourishment they will blossom and produce to the glory of God.

Through this parable Jesus calls the people to renewal, to bear fruit. It is really a call to witnessing, reminding one another of the mighty deeds of God, has always been the heart and soul of renewal. As Paul writes, “Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

The parable is timely for our age and for our church as well. There are many signals which indicate that the church is now at a crossroads in her life and ministry and stands in need of renewal. We need to find new ways to minister, so that the members come on Sundays to praise God, and be fed, instead of seeking alternatives to worship. We need to develop winsome methods to attract children so that greater numbers experience God’s grace and feel like a part of God’s family. We need to draw more adults into Christian education programs so that members find fulfillment through faith in an eternal Christ, rather than in the pursuit of transient pleasures. We need to take this whole matter seriously as a congregation as well, for our potential is mind boggling. Like Israel of old, our Lord is telling us today that our church, our congregation, was planted for a purpose and if we are not carrying out that purpose then it would be better if we were uprooted. That is not very nice; it is not very comforting. But there it is, straight and to the point. The terms are established by Jesus and not by me or anyone else.

To tell the truth it makes me uncomfortable. I'd prefer to ask God why. Or if Jesus evades the question, as he did in our text, then I'd rather hear him speak about lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and how God takes care of them. But you and I are not lilies or birds. We're human beings, created in God's image, capable, responsible and accountable. And if we believe the Bible when it says that we are the church, then you and I are the ones to whom our Lord addresses the parable, and our mission as a congregation needs to be examined.

I suggest we begin by taking more seriously than ever before the matter of sharing our faith stories, not just out there in the world, but in here, specifically and intentionally within our own membership. We need to show our appreciation and need for one another, by respecting each other's gifts, by expecting something of each other, and by reaching out to those who feel unnecessary. Everyone is important, everyone is essential, everyone is beloved of God and therefore an indispensable part of our church family. Everyone. We need to share that message with the people in our own pews.

Sharing our faith stories is the most effective tool we have in bringing about renewal. We are called to bear witness to our faith as we live and move and have our being right here in our own faith community. But what does that mean? Simply, it means to tell and to *be* good news to other people, to bring good news into other people's lives. We are to share with one another, and with the world, the good news that we are saved because Jesus Christ died for us and offers salvation full and free, and we are held in his marvelous power and love. It is as simple as that, yet as profound and rich and deep.

When people are approached about the matter of sharing their faith with another they often say they feel inferior. They don't think you should barge into a person's life and bombard them with your witness. I think they are right. So how does one go about it? When we share the good news with other people, it doesn't work to hammer them with the gospel. We try to do what God would do. And what did God do? God became incarnate, he became present with us. So we are to be present with one another, to come to them in love. That is the setting, that's the atmosphere of sharing our stories, to above all else, care for others and illustrate it by treating them compassionately. We need, of course, to be encouraged to read God's Word so that we can share it. In fact, there is no better way to grow in faith than by letting God speak to you through the Bible. But like all good news it has to get out, it needs to be shared. Like a lake which requires water to flow through it to retain its fresh, life-giving properties, so faith retains its vitality and strength by flowing out into the world to share its power by treating people, ALL PEOPLE, carefully, with maturity, respect, appreciation, and love. The good news of the gospel is best understood when the message is embodied in another person.

Somehow we've got to find a way to illustrate to the unchurched in our community and to our own members who are not yet involved, that our congregation cares. We want them to hear God's word because it is liberating and life-giving, and it will open their hearts to experience the goodness and mercy of God. But it must be born out of genuine concern. There's a story of a nurse who gave unselfish and devoted care to her patients. One man was deeply moved and thanked the nurse gratefully. The nurse replied, "O, I'm not doing it for you; I'm doing it for Jesus." How would you feel if you were the patient? Sounds good, sounds religious, sounds pious --- it's just awful! We are to be present for one another with compassion and respect.

That orientation toward people has all kinds of things to say about how we run a congregation. It has an impact on everything we do. Our church should be a fellowship in which the good news is not only “on going” but, as someone has said, “where it is also going on.” All that we do should reflect God’s unconditional invitation to experience the gospel, the good news. That is why we cannot simply stand by and let our brothers and sisters in Christ, young and old, drift away from the power and the glory of the gospel. We are compelled by the gospel to call one another back into the family and to speak words of acceptance, and to invite them to participate in the activities of the family because then, and only then, can they experience the warmth and joy of what it means to be God’s people.

I hope you begin to see how very important it is, not only that we *belong* to this congregation, but that we *participate* in its congregational life. We are planted for a purpose, to bear fruit that members, old and new, might be drawn in to receive the gifts of God and that they in turn might become gracious gifts to God and to us.

So our purpose as a faithful people of God is not to give answers to all the questions of life; our cause is to spread the good news of Jesus --- in our church, in our community and out into the world. And as we are faithful, our church, our congregation will bear fruits benefitting a people who have been saved by God’s amazing grace. Jesus calls us to be fishers of people, not merely keepers of the aquarium. So we commit ourselves to sharing the good news, in the name of Christ, to stir things up as the gardener stirred the ground, to nourish the people of God as the gardener fertilized the tree, to open our arms to be blessed by the glory of God.
All glory be to God.