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"Manure and Repentance"
Luke 13: 1-19

Repent or Perish

13At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

6 Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" ⁸He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

Whose fault is it anyway? Jesus is given this pointed question in today's text. When the Galileans were killed with their sacrifice in the Temple, had they done something to offend God and earn such punishment? Or the 18 Galileans killed by the collapsing tower, what had they done to offend God so, and to earn such punishment?

And don't we hear such questions in modern times as well? There's a massive hurricane that wreaks havoc on the Gulf Coast, and TV preachers blame the hedonism of New Orleans for the storm. Or there's a school shooting, and blame for this horrible tragedy is somehow tied to our nation's acceptance for gay marriage, or Muslim immigration, or some other absurd notion.

And it is human nature to assign blame isn't it? We want to assign a reason for the things we see. We mull these things over in our heads. In Old Testament times there was a strain of theology in some passages that did seem to assign blame for our suffering for our wrongdoings. If someone was suffering, they were being visited a punishment for God. The righteous and blameless would be blessed with a good and pain free life.

The writer of Job really took this question to task, didn't he? For those who aren't familiar, Job was a blameless man who is given immense suffering, even though he is an innocent man. His friends come and visit him, and do, indeed, seek to root out the sin in Job's life that caused such suffering. Then, they ask him to curse God for the wrongs being done to him. But Job is innocent of wrong, and refuses to lose faith. The whole book serves to become a lesson on suffering, and about faith in the face of hardship. It appears that, sometimes suffering just happens. Is a hurricane a malevolent force of God, or is it merely a combination of certain atmospheric phenomena coming together in a particular pattern? Is a flood a visitation of judgement, or is it merely a function of rainfall, soil saturation, gravity, and run-off patterns?

And even if all the suffering we see in tragedies in our world were somehow tied to human sin, the great majority of time we are awful about assigning blame. Is it somehow the fault of the victims to be caught up in a mass shooting? Or the absurd TV preacher excuses the cause for blame? Isn't it more likely that it's the fault of the shooter, pure and simply?

Here's the real turning point in the text: it's when Jesus points out that all of us are in need of changing our ways. He says, ⁴"Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." And goes on to tell this most peculiar of parables, "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" ⁸He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.""

This is what makes this a pure Lenten text. After talking about sin and evil, and the meaning of suffering. Jesus take the opportunity to basically say, “well, you think you’re any better than those poor Galileans, well, I have news for you, you’re just like them, you’re going to die someday, just like they did, and if you’re smart you’ll take the time you’ve been given and get busy changing your ways now, while you still can!” Umm, thanks for that, Jesus? But think about it for a minute, he’s right, isn’t he?

We’re all fallible, finite, human beings. We are all capable of horrible things, and we do indeed do horrible things to each other and to God’s creation. We like to make ourselves feel better by pointing out the splinter in our neighbor’s eye, while we’re carrying around a log in our own. But we fool ourselves when we do that. The way Paul wrote about it is this he said, “²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In other words, nobody can get on their high horse and proclaim their righteousness over any other. Theologians have traditionally said that the ground is level at the foot of cross. There is no one of us - not one - that is any closer to earning our salvation than any other. The work of forgiveness and mercy is all God’s work, all of the time, and we all rely on the Grace of God in Jesus Christ to free us from our own sinfulness.

So this text, after talking about sin and suffering, and the meaning of it all – all those happy go-lucky Lenten subjects – isn’t really about any of those things after all. It’s about manure and repentance. Manure and repentance you say? Yes.

First, the repentance. In the Bible, the word for repentance, metanoia, literally means to make a U-turn. It is to find oneself on the wrong path, and, seeing danger and peril waiting ahead, to turn around and walk away from it.

This is the point of Jesus’ teaching, ultimately: that we need to make U-turns. We need to examine our lives, find the areas where we have failed to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves and seek to change our ways.

But don’t get me wrong here, because it’s not just about repenting and making U-turns. Because if it were all about that, we’d have missed the point. We would be making our salvation all about us, about the changes we make. As if we could, somehow, through the force of our will, and through old fashioned trying harder, earn our way to goodness and righteousness under our own power. We

could work our way up to righteousness by our own boot-straps. But that's just hogwash without the manure.

Did you notice in the story, Jesus talks about the fig tree, given three years to bear fruit and doing nothing? The master wants to cut the tree down, toss it in the rubbish heap, and replace it. Sort of like the judgement on us, right? When we read all the stories in the news about how horrible we are to each other. The murders, the cheating, the scandals, the political intrigue, the nations at war, the abuse of the environment, and so on – we're really horrible to each other and to God's creation aren't we? Sometimes don't you think that we're not much better than that ungrateful tree?

But did you notice the pleading of the gardener? ""Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."" What's going to change the fruit tree's way, if nothing else does? Manure. Good, rich, fresh, manure, that gets tilled into the soil around its base and offers it all the nutrients, nitrogen, phosphorus, and moisture retention it needs to thrive.

And so here's the final crux of the story - the existence of suffering, the fallenness of humanity, the problem of our own sinfulness, and the need for repentance – the tree, which represents us, basically, can't do it on its own. It needs the faithful gardener to give it rich fertilizer, water, and loving attention, in order to change its ways.

And who is this loving person, this master gardener, who will change the tree's destiny? It is Jesus. The manure is the good news, the gospel. The simple truth that God loves you with reckless abandon and offers you forgiveness for your sins. That instead of a life filled with pointlessness, irrelevance, and misunderstanding, Jesus offers us a rich life, filled with purpose, and meaning. This rich life is to follow him on a path of discipleship; to love God and love your neighbor. And all of this is a free gift of God's loving grace. It's all God. It's all love. It's all grace. It's all a gift.

The tree could no sooner fertilize and water itself without the work of the good gardener, than it could have uprooted itself and dropped itself next to a stream. We're these same trees in need of the gardener. And the good fertilizer is at hand. It's in the words we speak this morning. In the hymns we sing; the

prayers we pray. What repentance looks like then, is simply surrendering to these things. To letting these rich compost materials work their way into your souls; to trust and believe; to have faith in God's goodness and lovingkindness.

And once you've done that, to get busy and get alongside God fertilizing other trees. What would it look like to do that? Who is suffering and wilting for lack of water and nutrients in our world? Are they homeless? Abandoned? Hungry? Lost? What would it mean for us to spread some manure?