

March 24, 2019

Luke 13: 1-9

Prayer: Dear God, please go with us into the study of your word for our time. It can be hard to determine what we should take from it 2,000 years later, and we look to you for illumination. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Found in Translation

Many of you know our younger daughter, Madison. Right out of college she taught English to kindergartners in South Korea.

And those children thought “Madison” was the same English word as “medicine.” And so they would come in every morning, and ask, “Madison Teacher, did you take your medicine?”

And they laughed and laughed. They thought it was hilarious. It was a joke that depended on translation.

When I lead studies on the gospels, I often start with a newspaper. I pull out clippings of news stories and Dear Abby. I pull out weather forecasts and sports analyses. I pull out comic pages and letters to the editor and obituaries that say the deceased “ran into the arms of Jesus.”

We then discuss how literally we are supposed to take those pieces of writing. Are they all impartial? Are they all true? How is each meant to be read?

It's pretty easy for people to answer those questions. Everyone knows that a comic strip is not the same as a news story. And everyone knows that a weather forecast is not the same as a

letter to the editor. Each is doing something very different and we know – instinctively – how to read them.

But then we open the Bible, written in a different time period with different views of history, different criteria for history. And the shading of discernment that we bring to contemporary writing flies out the window.

We want to make a prophecy a history book. We want to make a poem an instruction. We want to make a pastoral letter a gospel.

In fact, there are lots of things that throw us when we read this book that was written not to us but to readers 2,000 and 3,000 years ago. Today's Scripture passage is one of those.

It opens with Jesus mentioning two current events. This is what pastors and teachers do.

Every time there's a school shooting, every time there's a deadly hurricane, every time there's a horrendous tornado, sermons and prayers get rewritten to deal with them.

Because people come to church asking, *Where was God? Where was God during 9/11? Where was God during Hurricane Katrina? Where was God during the Charleston church shootings? What are we to make of this?*

Jesus had undoubtedly heard questions about the tragic events that everyone in Galilee and Jerusalem were talking about. And so he addressed them.

Our problem in translation, of course, is we know what we mean when we say 9/11. Hurricane Katrina. The Emmanuel AME shootings in Charleston.

We *don't know* what was going on historically with these events Jesus mentions from the year 27 or 28. We can only try to make sense from the context.

So turn with me please to **Luke 13: 1-9** and let's see if we can figure out what Jesus was talking about.

13 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.² He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?'³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

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?'⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

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. ⁷ So 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?"

⁸ He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '

One of the overriding themes of Luke's gospel is repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Jesus came to preach repentance and to forgive sins.

And that is the subject of this passage. To make his point, Jesus uses two recent events that everyone was talking about, two events everyone was familiar with. Scholars have scoured historic texts to find a mention of them, but haven't. But we do have accounts from the Jewish historian Josephus that hostile acts toward Jews were carried out during the reign of Pontius Pilate.

That's what this first reference must be. The same Pontius Pilate who would preside over Jesus' death apparently killed some Galileans while they were worshiping. We get that because the text says their blood was mingled with their sacrifices.

Jesus uses the example as a chance to sever the link between ill fortune and sin. He asks, **“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”**

That was a common view in the first century – that ill fortune followed sin.

Do you remember the story of the blind man in the gospel of John? Even the disciples asked, **“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”** Jesus answered, **“Neither this man nor his parents sinned....”** (John 9:2-3)

In this passage in Luke, Jesus isn't terribly interested in prolonging this discussion. **“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”**

His point is repentance, a turning away from one way of thinking and living toward another way of thinking and living. His way. The Way.

He then echoed his point with a second example. Apparently a tower had collapsed in Jerusalem, near the pool of Siloam, killing 18 people.

Again Jesus said that whether the victims were sinful or not had nothing to do with it. The accident was not a judgment on them. “... **(B)ut unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.**”

And then Luke does a very interesting thing. He follows these discussions with a parable of divine patience. If we are literal thinkers, we can get confused by this.

In one breath, Jesus is warning that we must repent or perish. There is some urgency indicated. In the next breath, he’s telling a story about a God who is willing to extend our chances for salvation, a God who is willing to wait.

My childhood church was led by a godly man who stayed in that pastorate for decades. I have the utmost respect for his ministry.

But for some reason, the words I remember to this day are: “What if you walk out of this sanctuary and get hit by a bus? Are you ready to face eternity?”

We all pull out that runaway bus from time to time. It’s the reason we wear clean underwear. It’s the reason we plan for corporate succession. Sometimes, it’s the reason we respond to an altar call.

Even Jesus was not above using that bus. *If a tower by the pool of Siloam falls on you tomorrow, have you repented and sought forgiveness for your sins?*

But what follows is not the logical extension of this argument – which would be to repent. Quickly. What follows shows the depth of Luke’s theology. Luke is not going to stick with the runaway bus.

A vineyard owner was impatient because his fig tree hadn’t produced in three years. Time was up. Cut ‘er down.

But *the gardener* pled for time. The *gardener* pled for patience. The gardener pled for ... mercy.

Let me dig around it and put manure on it. Let me try to save this fig tree.

Where we might expect a parable of warning that time for repentance is not unlimited, we get a parable of God’s patience. We get a parable of mercy.

We get a parable that reminds us of the New Testament letter of II Peter:

“... (W)ith the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

It’s both/and. Yes, we must repent because we never know what awaits us. And yes, God shows his love by extending the time for us to come to repentance.

It would be easy to stir all that together into some kind of theological mush. But Luke doesn’t. And neither should we.

Yes, there is an urgency to repentance.

Yes, we serve a merciful God who wants to give us every minute and every chance to repent.

Both/and. Tension. Conversation.

You have heard me say that the Bible is in conversation with itself. An example is this parable of the fig tree and its lesson repeated in II Peter. Subjects recur again and again, and we need to hold up each in the light of other.

These particular readings of grace, by the way, are at odds with a popular picture we hold of heaven. The pearly gates. In cartoons and popular lore, we picture God or St. Peter with a record book, looking for a reason to keep those pearly gates locked against us.

But both this parable about a patient gardener and this letter known as II Peter picture the opposite. Our God is patient. He doesn't want us to perish. He wants to let us in.

Another thing to remember is that biblical manuscripts came to us in Hebrew or Greek in long, sustained chains of text. All the divisions of chapters and verses and paragraphs and those italic headings in our Bibles are translators' decisions to help us read more easily.

And translators disagree about a lot of things. There is room for honest disagreement. There is room for formal translations and colloquial translations. That's why there are so many.

I remember once reading Clarence Jordan's translation of Paul. *The Cotton Patch Version of Paul's Epistles*. In chapter 12 of I Corinthians, Paul talks about spiritual gifts and why speaking in tongues was not superior to other gifts as the church at Corinth seemed to think.

And he ended the discussion by saying, **“And I will show you a still more excellent way.”** Most translations end that sentence with a period. But Clarence Jordan -- quite correctly, I think -- ended it with a colon.

The “more excellent way,” then, was what followed the colon: chapter 13, the so-called love chapter. **“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”** None of that speaking in tongues business meant a thing without what followed the colon: love.

Well, just as the Bible is in conversation with itself, congregations can be in conversation with themselves. When I mentioned that reading of I Corinthians years ago, our art room founder Karen Lucci went home and wrote a poem. She called it “Repunctuation.”

It first came to my attention as a possibility when my pastor changed a period to a colon

At the end of the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians

Changing the meaning immensely

Giving the scripture more grace

Making it more proactive

And I thought to my self

Maybe I've been punctuated all wrong

Maybe handfuls of periods were indiscriminately flung

Into my life where colons and dashes should be

Maybe bushels of periods have been cramping my style

Restricting my life

Damming me up

Maybe I'm more like a free flowing melody than a tidy paragraph

There the poem ended – or I assume it did -- because there was no period.

I am not suggesting that we re-translate the Bible. I'm not even suggesting we re-punctuate it.

But I am saying, we have the freedom to read and interpret and look at possibilities every bit as much as the translators of the King James Version and the New Revised Standard Version and Clarence Jordan and Luke and Paul. With the illumination of the Holy Spirit as our guide, we can bring fresh understanding to our Scripture.

For instance, our rehab counselor David Gay remarks that he used to be intimidated by Matthew 25. That passage instructs us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, and welcome the stranger.

David was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the command – until he read closely a subsequent verse: “... **(J)ust as you did it to *one of the least of these* who are members of my family, you did it to me.**”

We don't have to feed and clothe and care and visit and welcome *all* the least of these.

Do it for one. Do it for “**one of the least of these.**”

I will be the last person to say that Scripture is easy to understand. Some of it is. A lot of it isn't.

What matters is an intelligent, discerning, humble reading of Scripture. A recognition of its tensions. An appreciation of its depths. An acknowledgment that we can't understand it all – but that we can understand enough.

That tension is apparent in today's passage in Luke about two current events and a parable:

- 1) It is important for us to repent and seek forgiveness.
- 2) While we're at it, our gardener God isn't giving up on us.

Amen.